

VIETNAMESE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL PRACTICES

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*Human and Non-human Entanglement
in Times of Change*



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Authors: Pham Duc Trung, Nguyen Thi Minh Hang

Edited by: Hoang Hong Hanh, Hoang Thanh Tam, Bui Thi Thanh Thuy

Designed by: Nguyen Khanh Linh, Nguyen The Long

Address: Room 510, E1 Building, Trung Tu Diplomatic compound, No. 6
Dang Van Ngu Street, Dong Da Dist., Hanoi

Phone: +84 24 35738536

Email: ce.center.office@gmail.com

Website: ce-center.org.vn

INTRODUCTION: A MOVING MOVEMENT

The book *Vietnamese Social-ecological Practices: Human and Non-human Entanglement in Times of Change* is an experimental attempt to continue and deepen part of the research findings of C&E's 2020 research on Vietnamese youth ecological movement [1]. It offers comprehensive descriptions of ecological-social-cultural practices in Vietnam. The initiatives have been centred in a variety of fields, including traditional crafts, zero-waste consumption, natural farming, community space and fashion design. Despite the particularities and dynamics, they intersect at the discourses and practices of environmental protection, civic engagement and cultural preservation. In other words, their founders put emphasis on ecological impact, social and cultural responsibilities in their operation strategies.

Mobilising the available resources of the 2020 research, we contacted seven participants who are founders and project managers of the six enterprises for further research materials from May to October 2021. We drew on the data collected from 2020 research but also implemented digital ethnography, including literature review, observation, interview-like conversa-

tions, engagement via social media, email exchange and follow-up interviews via (video) calls.

One of the challenges of writing about these initiatives is updating ourselves on the changes of the social actors' ideas and practices. We were excited, but at the same time overwhelmed by their creativity, enthusiasm and passion. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the modifications and continuity of their initiatives reflect the dynamic processes in response to the social changes and availability of their resources. Together they have constituted a subtle grass-root movement in natural stewardship, cultural preservation and social justice. It can be seen that the movement is not static but continuously shapes and is shaped by social structures and people's ideas, beliefs, behaviours and practices. Therefore, the social-ecological movement is temporal, taking its shape according to the changes of social life.

We approached the social-ecological movement by analysing the specific individual studied cases. By providing thick descriptions of individual actors and their enterprises, the book aims

* Center for Development of Community Initiative and Environment.

to offer comprehensive narratives of the founders during the time they operate their models and a holistic picture of an on-going social-ecological movement in Vietnam. Having said that, this by no means aims to homogenise an overall movement in Vietnam but serves as an experiment to uncover particularities and complexities manifesting themselves in the ideologies and practices of specific cases. These initiatives are Vietnamese efforts to include ecological-social-cultural concerns besides profit-making of entrepreneurship. They are run by Vietnamese people and meant to benefit nature, traditional culture and Vietnamese suppliers and consumers. Along their entrepreneurial operation, the founders are aware of constructing personal, local and national identity in their products and social involvement. This, to us, makes them smart, creative, ethical and responsible social actors in their relationship with nature, their culture and communities.

Though the following themes do not consistently register themselves across all the cases, they have emerged throughout the analysis to offer a snapshot of ecological-social-cultural activism in Vietnam.

A GRASSROOT MOVEMENT

The analysed initiatives were sparked off by personal observations, imaginations and aspirations rather than pioneered by governmental agenda or international organizations. They all started with the people's burning questions, closely linked with their background and past experiences. What made Thọ* of Dốc Mơ Farm (Chapter 3) concerned about the ethics in agricultural production and social inequality in a production chain urged him to search for a more just agricultural production model which bridges the gap between the financial gain of farmers and that of middlemen. It is an outsider's perspective that ignited Đức and Đạt's professional concerns and social responsibilities to set up Think Playgrounds (Chapter 2) to exercise children's rights against impacts of urbanisation on community space in Hanoi. Thảo's mobility opportunities and global vision brought home to her the risk of cultural loss and identity crisis in globalization, thereby motivating her to embed the indigenous wisdom and high-quality craftsmanship in her eco-fashion brand Kilomet109 (Chapter 5).

Although our participants founded their own projects as individuals, they situate themselves

* Note on language: In this English version, we choose to faithfully present our participants and their enterprises' names, names of their involved community groups in Vietnamese, with diacritical marks.

in a larger changing society that is increasingly aware of nature stewardship, social equalities and traditional preservation. This can be clearly seen in Sạp chàng Sen of Ân Đặng (Chapter 4). The products sold at his zero-waste store have changed along the way Ân learned about the production of local small-scale suppliers and the increasingly changing public awareness of environmental protection.

At the same time, they are open to any possibilities that contemporary time offers, making necessary innovations and striving for experimentations. Thảo started with her available access to ethnic minority women to do experimentations in natural dyes and pigments. She also made use of her social network to connect with other groups of international agencies, scholars, universities, youth organizations and professional fashion designers to spread her cause of preserving Vietnamese textile heritage. Growing up in Cam Thanh where the bamboo craft has thrived for century, Tân (Chapter 6) realised the environmental depletion and impacts on communal structure of newly developed tourism in his homeland. He mobilised his high-quality technical and handicraft skills, business mind, language proficiency and long-term vision to establish Taboo Bamboo workshop, pioneering sustainable tourism and traditional craft development in his village.

Operating their projects is more of a process to them than as an end result, encouraging them to learn and keep moving forward. To Tiến (Chapter 1) and Ân, becoming a middleman is not only to connect producers to customers but also to empower them to get more knowledge of nature, business management and possibilities of reaching out to other communities of ethical producers and thoughtful customers. Founding Dốc Mơ Farm motivates Thọ to read and observe alternative agricultural models, analysing the pros and cons and working out his own ways of doing.

ENTANGLEMENT OF NATURE, PEOPLE AND THINGS

All of the founders initiated or have adjusted their operation plan according to their awareness of environmental degradation. Realising the impacts of human activities on the living environment, they have been concerned with creatively minimising use of chemical and plastic and the consumption of natural resources during their production and trading processes. Simultaneously, their models were run based on their knowledge of and experiences with nature. To Thọ, natural farming is an answer to a non-chemical agricultural model which at the same time can stabilize farmer's life and foster human connections with the land. He, Tiến and Thảo both strive for a close, slow production

cycle which embeds the non-scalable and nurturing features of nature. The participants take into account the lifespan of the ingredients and their products not only during the production stage but also the raw material production, distribution, consumption and disposal of the products. At any stage of the product life, environmental protection and social justice permeate into the philosophy of those enterprises.

The production integrity, social engagement and natural stewardship in the enterprises' operation reflect and are constructed by the overall assemblage of nature, people and things. This is prominent in Tân's account on hand-whittling bamboo. Only the incorporation of handcrafting can celebrate the nature of the material and create the quality of final products that no industrially mass-produced goods can compare. Accordingly, no one or nothing can survive without one another, making the human and non-human relationships intertwining. Therefore, what we distill from our participants' stories is the significance of heightened awareness of these co-dependent connections between living and non-living things. On the other hand, their models suggest decentering humans in the world and accentuating the collaboration between humans and other-than-human forms.

GLOBALIZATION AND LOCALIZATION

It is not that difficult to situate the development of these initiatives in the changing contexts of Vietnam after the 1986 Reform (Đổi Mới). The self-integration of Vietnam's economy into the global market has opened possibilities for exchange of ideas, people and goods. Nevertheless, the participants have also been made aware of the negative impacts on the environment, culture and social structures. Đức and Đạt of Think Playgrounds, with the insight of an international friend, realised the violation of children's rights amid urbanisation.

Industrialization and migration in Đức Huệ, Long An which led to the decline of traditional craft practice drew Tiến back to his homeland to revive wild straw handicraft livelihoods with 3T store. Thảo's observation of global flows into Vietnam urged her to preserve traditional textile craft villages and ethnic diversity in Vietnam.

Amid the hegemony of global brands and mass production of capitalism and globalization, these ecological-social-cultural initiatives turn to ecological and local values to combat environmental depletion, social inequalities and cultural loss. To the founders, localities have the power of carrying and continuing knowledge

of nature, indigenous wisdom and communal stable organization. Tân, Tiến and Thảo are all pursuing the goals to revive and develop traditional elements in their products by cooperating with their own or other ethnic communities to mobilise collective intelligence and diverse knowledge and practices across Vietnam. After several years of setting up Sạp chày Sen, Ân realised he wanted to support local small-and-medium-scale suppliers, benefitting the local economy and taking advantage of local resources.

We understand that these efforts are not against the global flows, resisting the integration into the world economy and consumption. Rather, the founders are in search for more sustainable production and trading modalities to strike the balance between internal and external resources and between commonalities and authenticities.

NAVIGATING SELF

The founders implicate the process of (self-) identification into their own project, as an individual, a member of a community and a Vietnamese citizen. To Thọ, running Dốc Mơ Farm helps him to realise that his aspiration was not an anti-chemical agenda but a long-term plan to restore a harmonious nature-human co-presence and interaction. To Tiến and Ân,

following the products they sell, from the ingredient location to production sites is an opportunity of learning and networking. Both of the middlemen consider the development of their enterprise as a journey of personal growth in terms of knowledge, ideologies and practices.

On an entrepreneurial level, key actors aspire to make their own reputation by distinguishing themselves from other business models. Think Playgrounds aims to raise public awareness of children's rights to play by offering solutions to limited community space in Vietnamese cities rather than emphasizing marketing and sales. Thảo takes pride in Kilomet109's ability to inform customers and the public of the production cycle, from growing raw materials to finishing and distribution.

On a national and cultural level, their products are meant to help forge a Vietnamese identity in the global market. All of the founders resort to traditional cultural ways of being, living and doing but also combine alternatives of new knowledge, practices and technologies in their enterprises. Drawing on the traditional knowledge and techniques of bamboo craft in Cam Thanh, Tân founded his Taboo workshop by mobilising how personal language skills, business mind, and long-term vision he has accumulated during years in university and industrial sector. He integrated a tourism model into his handicraft workshop to introduce local tra-

ditions and cultural values to his international clients. Kilomet109's eco-garments, to Thảo, are meant to combat the stereotypes of post-war Vietnam, shaping the images of a diverse, colorful and creative Vietnam to the world.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

The people in the narratives, together with their memories, beliefs, experiences and aspirations, construct their own imaginations of realities and possible futures of a more livable planet where nature is well taken care of and social justice is exercised. Their stories partly represent the socio-ecological changes in Vietnam today.

Based on the geography of human settlement, the journeys of Đức, Đạt, Phương and Ân can represent for initiatives in urban areas, the stories of Tiến, Thọ and Tân can represent for initiatives in countrysides, while Thảo's practice can represent for changes in remote areas. These different narratives show that change can happen anywhere, once there are dedicated people.

The response to the initiatives in the book shows the attention of a part of Vietnamese society to the values related to socio-ecological transformation. The presence of community is clear in every story. They are citizens who care

about sustainable lifestyles in the story of Sạp chàng Sen, urban communities who care about the joy of children in Think Playgrounds' story. They are the people who come to Dốc Mơ Farm and Lia Thia's home to enjoy time with nature. They are also customers who understand the value of sustainable crafts and are willing to pay a high price for Taboo's and Kilomet109's products. We also acknowledge the interest and willingness of the local governments who want to support the story of Think Playgrounds, Dốc Mơ Farm and Taboo, although their actions have not always been effective.

Each initiative in this book is an inspirational example for us. However, when we are trying to bring them together, we consider these initiatives to be individual actions, spontaneous and not connected enough to create a prominent movement in Vietnamese society. Nevertheless, these narratives reveal that the potential of the socio-ecological transformation in Vietnam is remarkable. We hope that there will be more research, together with other supporting projects to gradually shape the form of socio-ecological transformation in Vietnam, both in theory and in practice.



■ An open space in Dốc Mơ Farm.
(Photo: Dốc Mơ Farm)

FOLLOWING CO BANG: RUPTURES, (RE)CONNECTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION IN TIMES OF CHANGE

I got to know about 3T store and Tiến when I was working for Center of Development of Community Initiative and Environment (C&E) in 2019. Back then we were organizing Ecoweek 2019, a training on ecological lifestyle for students of Thai Nguyen University and invited Tiến to speak about his zero-waste store. One day before the event, Tiến flew to Hanoi and caught the bus to Thai Nguyen* to discuss again the contents of his talk with us. He dressed simply, but did not look frugal; rather, he gave calm and gentle vibes. Later in summer 2020, I had a chance to visit him in Long An**, his thatched roof house with clean and cool floor, his garden and the earth houses in the garden some apprentices built in a eco-construction workshop the previous month. Tiến showed us around the house and passionately explained functions of the objects. I felt welcome and saw how excited he was when the guests expressed their interest in what he was doing. I did some research



■ Tiến's house in Long An.
(Photo: 3T Store)

* Thai Nguyen city is the capital city of Thai Nguyen Province, around one-hour bus ride away from Hanoi.

** Tiến grew up in Duc Hue, a rural district in Long An, Mekong Delta region, Vietnam.

about 3T store before our visit and talked to him on that day to learn that together with 3T store which sold co bang* straws and handicraft items, connecting producers with customers, Tiến was planning educational workshops and cultural preservation projects to promote simple eco-lifestyle among his community.

I realized that in Tiến's accounts, co bang is a social agent who helps to heal the ruptures in nature, traditional culture and knowledge under the regime of mass production, industrialization and globalization. Tiến identified himself as the mediator between artisans and consumers. Yet, after interviewing him and observing his activities via website and Facebook, I found out that Tiến also plays a role of a caregiver and healer of the disconnections in nature, traditional craft, local livelihoods and knowledge of customers and his own identity. In other words, he is a connector through selling products made of co bang, the grass that, to him, has permeated his everyday life, from 'the thatched roof to the bed mat'**. Thanks to co bang straws, Tiến has learned how to make use of grass stalks that used to be disposed of and turn them into useful items. Thanks to co bang mats and bags,

* 'Co bang' is the local name for a species of wild grass naturally grown in Dong Thap Muoi (Plain of Reeds), Mekong Delta region, Vietnam. Due to its specifically distinctive features, we decided to keep the Vietnamese original name in this English version to differentiate it from other kinds of wild grass.

** All direct quotes in this chapter, if not further explained, are taken from research interviews in May 2020 or September 2021.

Tiến has reflected more on restoring traditional crafts and enhancing the livelihoods of Duc Hue artisans. Thanks to educational workshops on handicrafts, Tiến has connected his customers to values of crafting and handicraft products. Thanks to selling grass straws and handmade mats, Tiến has learned to manage a business and fostered his sense of belonging to the homeland. Tiến's narratives intertwine with the life of co bang, at the intersection between a personal life and the interconnected life of nature, humans and things.

This chapter traces part of trajectory of co bang in Duc Hue, Long An entangled with the stories of Tiến and his 3T store, to demonstrate the endless attempts to (re)connect natural, socio-cultural values and personal identity in response to fast-paced industrialization and modernization in Tiến's village. We follow co bang from the harvest to grass processing, weaving and trading. The assemblage of nature, people and objects has been formed as the result of care, simple attention and aspirations of learning and self-identification.

CARING FOR NATURE

Co bang naturally develops in fields in Duc Hue, Long An. Situated in the wetland Dong Thap Muoi (Plains of Reeds), whose land is flooded in the rain season while getting dry in the dry season, together with harsh climate conditions, more than half of Duc Hue's acid sulphate soil area becomes the natural habitat of a typical flora and fauna. According to Tiến, there is a whole ecosystem of humans and animals co-dependent on each other. Types of grass are co nan, co bang, co dung, danh danh, tram nuoc, etc... The animals vary from birds, reptiles, insects to fish such as lia thia fish (betta fish) living in shoals. Duc Hue people, therefore, have developed their livelihoods in accordance with the characteristic natural conditions of their homeland, including co bang. It becomes a fundamental ingredient for people's livelihoods.

In order to cultivate co bang, harvesters need to attend to the plant's characteristics and ecological surroundings. Tiến obtains the ingredients from nature rather than growing. He used to cut the grass, yet soon realized it took very long for co bang to reproduce. He talked about people who grew co bang in a big area in Duc Hoa who cut grass and burned the whole patch so that the stalks would share the same height. Then, they would pump water in to stimulate underground roots to grow. However, since this method prolonged the regenerative process,

they resorted to chemical fertilisers to accelerate grass growth. This means the natural habitat of birds, stocks, dragonflies, spiders are destroyed accordingly. Additionally, the cutting method poses more risk of fire. After the harvest, the dead young, short grass stalks will be left dry on the field and burned into ash. Dry grass, strong wind and hot dry air in Dong Thap Muoi region together will be able to spread the fire to other paddy fields and tram (acacia) fields nearby. Hence, artificially growing co bang in a big area and irregular harvesting will have great impact on the ecosystem and people's lives.

Tiến emphasises sustainable exploitation of materials and eco-friendly production. He started to attend to ethics, efficiency and locality in production after an incident while cutting co bang. When co bang straw was first introduced and welcomed by the public, Tiến received many orders at the same time. One day when he was cutting co bang, he accidentally cut his thumb with the sickle. Looking at the blood flowing out of the deep wound, Tiến was shocked to realize that the cutting method he used had greatly hurt nature. After that, he happened to come across a Khmer couple pulling grass stalks up by hand. It brought home to Tiến that this is a sustainable exploitative method, minimising impact on the ecosystem while ensuring year-round harvesting. The cutting method removes both mature and im-

mature grass stalks. The young immature ones then will be disposed of as unqualified for making straws or weaving. The whole cut co bang field as an ecosystem will then be destroyed as co bang plays the role of a knot in the food chain of the ecosystem. On the contrary, with the method of pulling, harvesters can choose mature stalks qualified for product making after they seed and let the young immature ones continue to grow. This way of harvesting seems to be less productive but, in fact, helps to save time, natural resources and more importantly, reduce human intervention into the ecosystem. The harvesting process thus can take place all

year round and food of animals will sustain. Tiến views this to be sufficient, selective harvesting.

Ingredient harvesting needs to go hand in hand with the production of both grass straws and grass craft items. The big grass stalks that used to be thrown away or used to make thatched roof now become materials for grass straws. After grass stalks are sanitised, they are cut into pieces of 18cm, two ends are cut with a sharp knife and the inner part is clean with an iron rod to give a tube shape. Small grass stalks are dried, pound till flat and used to weave



■ Tiến selecting mature grass stalks to pull up. (Photo: 3T Store)

mats and bags. Other products of 3T store that integrate resource saving are bamboo products. Small bamboo stems are used to make straws and bamboo curtains. Big stalks will be peeled into bamboo strips to weave baskets. Therefore, it can be seen that harvesting ingredients in nature requires consideration for envi-

ronment, creativity and flexibility to use natural resources efficiently.

Small scale and manageability are central in all stages of Tiến's production. To him, harvesting co bang does not necessarily scale up; in Duc Hue, it is more suitable to have a small-scale,



■ After rinsed and cut, grass stalks are sun-dried. (Photo: 3T Store)

decentralized model. This requires evaluation of available resources to ensure the model's capacity of caring for nature. At this point, it dawned on me that managing a project goes beyond depending on nature towards 'simulating' nature. Non-scalability is an origin of nature and thereby, it has nothing to do with catching up with the fast pace of industrialization, consumerism and globalization. Likewise, managing a business requires consideration for resources; in other words, it needs to be manageable to avoid excessive expansion. To Tiến, uncontrollable expansion may pose problems regarding environmental damage like scaling up co bang cultivation. Nature simulation and regulated expansion help to ensure stable and durable operation of the enterprise.

PRESERVING THE TRADITIONAL CRAFT

As co bang naturally grows in Long An, co bang handicraft has developed into a traditional craft in Duc Hue. According to Tiến, 20 years ago, any woman in his district knew how to weave co bang into craft products such as mats, bags and baskets. The traditional craftsmanship has flourished and passed down from one generation to another.

Since industrialization hit Tiến's rural district, many ruptures were formed. In 2015, the Na-

tional New Rural program, industrialization and urbanization brought about a number of changes in Duc Hue people's lives. Those who knew how to weave quitted traditional craft to work at factories. This caused the shortage of human resources while Long An remains the main ingredient site of co bang. In Tiến's accounts, it took up to 10km to travel to artisans' locations back then. Most of co bang was grown in Long An but soon would be transported to Cambodia or Tiến Giang where artisans' labour was available. This rupture prolonged the distance between site of ingredients and that of production, which Tiến views as unnecessary.

Tiến was determined to revive traditional craft and strike the balance between ingredient sites and crafters' workshops. He contacted women in his rural district and partnered with them to make co bang handicraft items for 3T store. The distance between the harvesting site and their house, where these women mobilize their time at home to weave co bang, is shortened to a couple of kilometres. Tiến's business partners are mostly middle-age or old women who have expertise in weaving and are unqualified for factory work. In this way, traditional craft knowledge and skills will be continued and consolidated. Besides, Tiến wants their partnership to not only restore their tradition but also stabilize these women's lives with monthly income. At our interview in May 2020, Tiến did not hesitate to share about the salary he paid them at

around 3.6 - 4 million Vietnam dong, which is average rate in the area. He explained that once they have realized the financial potential of the craft, they will be able to appreciate and dedicate themselves to developing it.

Addition to income stability, preservation of traditional craft to Tiến also needs to be manageable in light of artisans' labour. Tiến humbly told me if he could manage his 3T store and keep it manageable enough but capable of offering means of livelihoods for the local people, he



■ Mrs. Ba Hân (middle) is one of the artisans that work with 3T Store. (Photo: 3T Store)

would be able to do his bit to contribute to his homeland's development. On artisans' sides, they comply with a working plan which is appropriate to their ability but can still help them to earn enough income for the whole family. Women at co bang straws work 7 hours a day, from Monday to Friday. Hence, they can reserve some other time to do the gardening, take care of their family and earn extra income from other

jobs on weekends. Tiến quoted one of the artisan 'Never overwork, because if you fall sick, even money can never make up for the pain.'. In short, restoring the traditional craft needs to take into account the financial potential it brings and the local artisans' lifestyles and situations. 'Enough', 'small' and 'manageable' become key words in Tiến's business philosophy and reflect a rural lifestyle.



■ Mrs. Ba Hài weaving a cane basket.
(Photo: 3T Store)

SPREADING AND CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE

Co bang and craft products form the connections between artisans and natural and cultural values, between artisans and consumers, between customers and handmade craft items. Aware of economic benefits and cultural values behind co bang straws, mats and bags, Tiến realizes the significance of connections between people, things and their symbolic meanings. He, therefore, has developed learning projects to offer his customers hands-on experiences in production processes or young people to learn about traditional craft preservation.

Lia Thia's Home [2] was initiated to provide 'village' [3] courses for learners to directly learn from artisans who make handicraft items for 3T store. Lia Thia explained the meaning of the name on their website. As this project was born in wetland where 'lia thia fish swim in co bang flooded field and tram forest' [4]. Course objectives are to extend knowledge and experiences of young people who want to learn more about traditional crafts, enhance socio-cultural value appreciation and facilitate collective efforts to preserve the local values and rural identity. Studying the course description, I realized the spirit

of Lia Thia's Home is offering an open learning space with real-life farmers and their everyday activities.

As I understand, experience, to Tiến, is the most effective learning approach for learners to conceive knowledge through practice. This reminds me of the example Tiến took about the correlation between sensory experiences and knowledge. On a study trip to India, Tiến learned that eating with hand helps people reconnect with the food they are going to let down into their body, with nature fostering humankind through sensuousness. That is the reason why Lia Thia's Home designed the learning activities such as 'waking up in an earth house', 'growing vegetables, cooking with fire, learning about the mangrove ecosystem' [5] as in a farmer's life. The sensory and bodily experiences enable the knowledge to be continued and constructed. It demonstrates the intimate relationship between body and mind, materials and immaterials.

Besides experiences, Tiến aims to connect local people with a simple, eco-friendly lifestyle. At our interview in May 2020, he mentioned his idea on nourishing vegetables to motivate them to grow vegetables in their own garden. The severe pandemic* directed Tiến back to the most

* The Covid-19 pandemic that has global impacts since late 2019.

basic demands of daily life. He observed that every household has their own garden. If members of the family can grow a variety of vegetables, it will meet the demand of their vegetables consumption so that they do not need to buy more at the market. If they produce an excessive amount of vegetables, they can share and ex-

change with other families. Tiến viewed this as a way to live in close contact with nature, produce food self-sufficiency and ensure food quality for the family.

In summary, thanks to co bang and traditional crafts, Tiến and 3T store are able to forge the



■ Learners of Lia Thia's Home have a chance to gain hands-on experience. (Photo: 3T Store)

connections between nature, people and things. Tiến plays the role of more than a middleman between suppliers and customers. He also spreads and develops the knowledge of nature, culture and society through his learning activities. Within the networks of these meanings and connections, Tiến has found the connection between himself and other people, nature and things. His identity has also been constructed during his operation of 3T store throughout the last 5 years.*

SELF-DISCOVERY AND SELF-MAKING

Managing 3T is Tiến's process of identifying his roles and capacities in a supply chain. In early days of the zero-waste store in 2015, Tiến witnessed the upheavals of his business, from making recycled products to selling items made of eco-materials. Back then besides teaching, Tiến partook in youth initiatives on environmental protection. He realized people's everyday lifestyle disposed of too much trash. His initial objective was to 'recycle if you can't reduce' and to open a store selling items from recycled materials to make a living and spread environmental protection messages. After 9 months, he was confronted with several issues with the model. He was unable to control the material

production and product's life after expiration. In other words, he could only regulate the production and trading stages while the life of the products after being dumped was oblivious to him.

Tiến re-focused on eco-products made from natural materials which to him can solve disposal problems he had encountered. The exploitation, care and return to nature will become natural as it should be. However, Tiến was faced with another difficulty: the increased lack of natural ingredients due to the consequences of industrial agriculture. The ecosystem, as a result, has been destroyed and the land has been fragmented due to the construction of infrastructure. Tiến was made aware that in order to restore natural ingredients, we need collective efforts. Once people realize the values of nature, they will join hands to grow and develop the ecosystem. Here we can see the shift in Tiến's perspective on environment protection, from recycling to producing products made of eco-materials. This alternative has brought Tiến and artisans closer to nature. Along this line, Tiến expressed his aspiration to live 'a farmer's life'.

He returned to Long An to practice 'a farmer's life' that could not be realized in the city. Tiến

* Until the interview in May 2020.

wants to live in harmony with nature, reduce impacts on environment and humans, with his care and return to natural gifts. He explained that having land, planting trees and raising castles like a farmer enable his freedom to identify himself with ecological values. Identifying himself with a farmer demonstrates his willingness to be part of the common picture of surroundings where a life in harmony with nature and food sovereignty can be found. Tiến has found and made his identity in the relationship with nature.

Besides identifying a lifestyle for himself and working out the direction for 3T store, Tiến got to know more about his capacity and roles as the owner of a small enterprise. After 9 months opening 3T store and encountering the shortcomings in recycling products, Tiến decided to take a break for two years and work in a social enterprise focusing on natural agricultural product supply chain. There he learned how to manage a small business with high efficiency and cost-saving. Tiến now operates 3T in accordance within his abilities, experience and resources instead of making unnecessary expansion. He argued that he would keep his business small but easy to scale up. In this way, everyone can learn and scale up his model rather than making big investments. Also, ethics is the priority in his agenda. He insists on paying attention to impacts of the life cycle of his products on the environment and society. Once again,

'small', 'scalable' and 'efficient' are key elements in his management strategy.

Furthermore, Tiến actively looked for company. He learned that 'you should never build a house alone'. In other words, Tiến is aware that he needs companions in his journey of spreading eco-lifestyle and environment protection. Thanks to grass straws and handicraft items, he was able to reach out to harvesters who care and nurture nature. He contacted local artisans for cooperation. The youth initiatives for the environment he participated in gave him a chance to meet like-minded people. Having the attention from the media and press, Tiến felt recognized and realized the meanings in his cause. One day, he was cultivating co bang and was recognized by some people, thanks to the media coverage on his enterprise on TV. Little moments like that are motivations for Tiến to keep moving forwards.

Tiến's personal connections through co bang can also be found in his love for his homeland Long An. Tiến looked back at how excited he was about leaving Long An to work in Tay Ninh. Back then he was eager to explore new lands and felt that his hometown was gloomy. After seven years, Tiến finally acknowledged the beauty of co bang fields whose images had intimately been part of his childhood. Long An, to Tiến, was still blessed enough to maintain the distinctive landscape of the countryside

with its nature, scenery and people. 'Only when I'm home do I know what's next', Tiến said. He would like to contribute to the development of his homeland and be rooted here to take care of it. 3T store is the first step of this cause, for Tiến to first stabilize his own life, and then to create more jobs for the local people with their traditional craft. From his narratives, I imagined the greenness of co bang fields in the blazing sunlight of the wetland region, the smell of sun-dried co bang from co bang mats and the sound of raindrops from thatched roof house on stormy days. Are these strong sensory experiences ingrained in his memory and body the reasons why he grew a love for his homeland when he was away? He realized he has a love for the wetland region and has developed the products of/for this land. I was touched by his sense of belonging and devotion to homeland. Tiến has constructed his identity and aspirations based on this sense of belonging thanks to his love for Long An and the beauty of co bang fields.

AS A CONCLUSION: AMONG THE FLOWS

Narratives of co bang and 3T store are entangled with a time of change in a rural region amid industrialization and modernization. Reflecting on impacts on environment and socio-cultural life, Tiến is an example of the movement 'small is beautiful'* to heal the wounds in ecology, people and things. His 3T store and its tangible and immaterial meanings contribute to the preservation of traditional craft and local identity amid fast-flowing streams of mass production and consumerism. Although people nowadays talk about industrialization and modernization with fast pace, large scale and wide scope of influence, Tiến decides to remain calm, small, manageable and persistent. He is humble and chooses ethical, transparent and responsible production in consideration for nature and humankind.

Tiến's stories are situated at the intersection between personal experiences and common life. He started with his own reflections, with his childhood memories, from the homeland where he grew up and with the sensuous experiences. I was impressed by how many ideas he was cherishing. He said he will learn something new

* Inspired by 'Small is beautiful' by Schumacher (1973).

once a while for himself and his hometown. Managing 3T is also a learning process where Tiến learns, changes, self-evaluates, reflects and adapts. His acknowledged contributions which in turn, reflect and shape his identity are the result of his interactions with and inspirations from nature, people and objects.

Tiến founded 3T which stands for 'Tiet giam - Tai su dung - Tai che' (Reduce - reduce - Recycle) as part of his principles of business operation. He cut down unnecessary management stages to maximize efficiency. For example, 3T does not have any physical location but remains a virtual store and receives online orders, which saves Tiến from a big investment in the beginning. Every trading activity needs to take into account the impact on the environment. For example, Tiến refused to export his products as he had not worked out the solutions to carbon emissions and plastic packaging. Nevertheless, I believe that though he simplifies his business operation, his enthusiasm for environment protection and love for his people and homeland will persist. There are many projects, companions and new products Tiến has been cherishing to care for nature. Come what may, Tiến said he will make a home here, in this wetland region Long An where 'co bang fields are very beautiful'.



■ Tiến with co bang straws
(Photo: 3T Store)

■ A kid is playing at xom Phao playground.
(Photo: Think Playgrounds)



THINK PLAYGROUNDS: RAISING VOICES AND ACTIONS FOR THE RIGHT TO PLAY OF CHILDREN

In 2013, an American woman who has a hobby of photographing children's playgrounds came to Vietnam. Her name is Judith Hansen. Judith brought her camera to several public spaces in Hanoi but she could not find any playground. Asking local people for help, she was taken to some empty concrete yards, then to Hanoi's Children Place where Judith saw children playing with equipment for hire such as electric cars, plastic animals on springs, and ferris wheels. Judith was disappointed as she could not find 'the true playground' in her imagination. All playgrounds Judith visited in Hanoi at that time did not encourage children to exercise, and what bothered Judith most of all was that they were not for free.

The person who followed Judith to film is Kim Đức, an urban planner who studied master of landscape design in Paris. Returning to Vietnam in 2007, Kim Đức opened her design studio. In 2012, she closed the studio to study experimental documentary filmmaking at DocLab, Hanoi. Through the DocLab network, Kim Đức knew about Judith's intention of finding playgrounds and she decided to accompany this American woman. Kim Đức considered the journey with

Judith as an opportunity to test what she had learned at DocLab. The documentary-making process had the support of Quoc Dat, a reporter for Cars and Motorbikes Magazine.

The documentary footage was extended beyond the expectation, but Judith still had not found the 'true playground', she came up with the idea of giving Hanoi a playground at Hoan Kiem Lake. Artist Ban Ga supported Judith to implement the idea with the help of Kim Duc in urban design. The design of the playground was a slide in the shape of a turtle, reflecting the story of Hoan Kiem Lake in the form of a visual installation. This idea is forever on paper because the licensing process in a sensitive location like Hoan Kiem Lake is complicated.

In the journey of finding the 'true playground' and developing the concept of the turtle slide project, Judith and her companions coincidentally touched a puzzle of the bigger context of public spaces in Hanoi. According to a survey by Healthbridge, Hanoi is lacking a lot of flower gardens and playgrounds in residential areas, especially in the city center, public space accounts for less than 2% of the total land use.

In the planning vision to 2030, the average public space for the central area of Hanoi is just only 3.02m² per person (Hanoi Institute of Planning and Construction, 2014), much lower than the rate per person in other cities like Paris (11.5m²) or New York (23.1m²) [6]. Not only lacking in quantity and area, but people's ability to access public space is also very limited when most parks in Hanoi have fences and charge entrance fees. The design quality of these public spaces also has many shortcomings as one of the most basic elements of public space is the children's playground has not been paid enough attention to.

WHEN THE INNER FIRE WAS IGNITED

In addition to the initial awareness of the current state of public spaces in Hanoi, the process of accompanying and collaborating with Judith also brought a lot of inspiration and profound motivation to Kim Đức and Quốc Đạt, the later two co-founders of Think Playgrounds.

Đạt described Judith as the one who “enlightened”* him about a very different world in the West, where the concepts and standards of

public space are shaped in theory, where the access to public space is free for every citizen, where the right to play of children is protected by law.

And for Đức, the enthusiasm and positive energy emanated from Judith left a deep impression on her:

Her spirit inspired us, people living in Hanoi, to think and question, influenced us to do something for our city, she is the endless source of inspiration for us to found Think Playgrounds and keep working until these days. [7]

Perhaps Judith Hansen herself did not expect her Vietnam visit to be the starting point for Kim Đức and Quốc Đạt's social worker career - the journey of patience, challenges, and joy that has been creating more than 200 playgrounds for children and communities (until 2021). This is also the journey that brought Kim Đức to the list of BBC 100 Most Influential Women in 2020.

The inspiration for the name Think Playgrounds that Kim Đức and Quốc Đạt chose from the very beginning also came from the content of

* All direct quotes in this chapter, if not further explained, are taken from research interviews in August 2020 or June 2021.

Quốc Đạt with his handmade playground equipment. (Photo: Think Playgrounds)



Kim Đức is standing beside her wall-painting in a playground. (Photo: Think Playgrounds)



Judith's emails, when she constantly repeated the title 'think playgrounds' as an invitation for everyone to think together to build creative playgrounds for Vietnamese children.

FRIENDLY PLAYGROUND

Visiting the Facebook page ThinkPlaygrounds [8], many people may feel overwhelmed about the amount of information that appears when rolling the cursor down the stream of events. Many playground projects can be found here, from tiny to large scales. The commonality between the different projects is the way Think Playgrounds used materials and the handcrafted look which is often seen in DIY products.



■ Think Playgrounds's studio on Hoang Hoa Tham street. (Photo: Think Playgrounds)

The choice of materials reflects Think Playgrounds' concern for the environment. There are two types of materials that are regularly used: eucalyptus wood and recycled materials and items such as tires, wood chips, or even car wrecks. After many trials and tribulations, Think Playgrounds chose eucalyptus because it is a traceable plantation wood. By using recycled materials, Think Playgrounds wants to influence the community's perception of using resources more efficiently.

On the other hand, the rustic, handcrafted look in many of Think Playgrounds' finished products is the result of the playground's progress. With Think Playgrounds, the participation of the community plays an important role, as well

as the contributions of volunteers. Therefore, the finishing technique is often not too difficult. By mastering some basic skills of sawing, cutting, drilling, and bolting, participants themselves can build a simple structural frame, or assemble different components to create complete playground equipment. An easier activity for volunteers is painting. This is an activity that often attracts a large number of members in communities, including children.

Following the footsteps of Think Playgrounds, it is not difficult to see the connection between the core values in environmental and community aspects with the method of project implementation, as well as the final appearance of the product. Thanks to this coherence thread, Think Playgrounds gradually makes an impact with their friendly playgrounds.



■ Painting with community at No than playground, Dong Anh, Hanoi. (Photo: Think Playgrounds)

CHANGE FOR THE SAKE OF MISSION

The greatest mission of Think Playgrounds is making playgrounds in the city. Compared to children in cities, children in suburbs and mountainous areas have much more outdoor space to play.

Whatever Think Playgrounds does, though it is building playground or organising events, the most important thing is raising the message: children have right to play, we should loosen the pressure of studying on them.

- Huệ Phương, project manager of Think Playgrounds

It can be seen that the mission of Think Playgrounds contains two parts: building urban playgrounds is 'the physical part', and speaking for children's right to play is 'the non-physical part'. Giving the team a mission early on, and then making efforts to change and adapt to fulfill that mission is what differentiates Think Playgrounds from many other building playground groups in Vietnam. In 2013 - 2017, the movement of playground making spread out in Vietnam with many projects and volunteer groups, for instance, "Hoa Trên Đá" in Hanoi, 'Lăn Bánh Ước Mơ' in Saigon, or student clubs like Kicodo in Danang, 'Viên Gạch Hồng' in Hue



A playground in an international school - a business project of Think Playgrounds ■
(Photo: Think Playgrounds Facebook)

and playground project chain of 1+1>2 architecture firm. After this period, the movement was not as dynamic as before. In retrospect, Think Playgrounds was the only group that made organizational changes that oriented their long-term path centered on making playgrounds.

Think Playgrounds started as a volunteer group with the participation of many architecture students and civil engineers. After the first 2 years of operation with remarkable results from the effort to 'reclaim the playground' in city residential areas, the amateur Think Playgrounds volunteers have become experts in playground design and construction. However, most members of Think Playgrounds were working part-time at that time, which means they could not fully focus on the mission. This is the period when Think Playgrounds needs to find a more sustainable and long-term way to organise their human resources. For these reasons, 2017 was a milestone that marked the transformation of Think Playgrounds from a volunteer group to a social enterprise.

In the position of a social enterprise, Think Playgrounds has been running a new department with business contracts on playground design, construction, and manufacturing playground equipment. The income of Think Playgrounds members is gradually stable. Having more customers with higher requirements also requires

Think Playgrounds to dig deeper into the quality and creativity of their products and services. In addition, the business work also allows Think Playgrounds to have more funds to support communities in building playgrounds, organising events or training for volunteers who are willing to set up playgrounds in remote areas. Being a social enterprise, Think Playgrounds has stabilised their inner side while keeping the expansion of their projects to the outer world.

COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

Attractive and friendly playgrounds is a fundamental element creating the physical aspect of Think Playgrounds' work, while the effort in communication plays an important role to help their work and the values behind their projects to be known.

The goal of communication with Think Playgrounds is not only to promote the products, making change in public perception is their highest target. For children to have more playgrounds in the cities, adults need to understand and respect their right to play, be aware of the lack of playgrounds in public spaces, and raise the confidence that change could happen right in their own community.

Facebook is one of Think Playgrounds' effective communication channels. Through this channel, Think Playgrounds attracted a large number of volunteers right at their very first project - Xóm Phao playground (finished in 2014). Besides, newspapers and television are also important communication channels to bring the image of physical playgrounds and the message of children's right to play reach the residents of the city. Some press excerpts were written about Think Playgrounds:

Now, if communities create a neighborhood that is friendly to their children, then one day, the government will have to change their perception. Vietnam was one of the first countries to sign the convention on the rights of the child, which includes the right to play, but look, what are the children playing on the sidewalk and how are they playing when being surrounded by homework and electrical games. [9]

When we think of volunteering activities for children, we often think of the needy situations in remote areas, which create motivation for adults to want to do something good. However, it's a wrong perception that children in cities have everything. The Think Playgrounds projects have shown a situation that city dwellers have forgotten that their own children need help. [10]

Aiming to change public perception, Think Playgrounds also has another unique and creative form of communication - the series of events of Play Day, Play Street. In this series of events, Think Playgrounds brings portable playground equipment to the central area or on the pedestrian streets of Hanoi. These events create multi-purpose spaces that both attract the attention of the community and media, give meaningful time of play to children and their families, and also give Think Playgrounds a place to experiment with their new ideas and products.

Combining various forms of communication with the promotion of physical playground projects, Think Playgrounds gradually receives many invitations from individuals, communities, businesses, and local governments.

FOCUSING ON RIGHT PLACES

Finding the right location is a challenge for street playground builders like Think Playgrounds. In fact, the small remaining empty spaces are often the place where conflicts of interest in use arise. In the experience of Think Playgrounds, a common conflict is when elderly people often use free space for a badminton court, exercise, or organising events. Convincing elders to leave this space for the playground is difficult. Another common type of conflict of interest is the en-

croachment of public land for private use such as parking lots and restaurants. Not simply a matter of physical space, these are also social knots that are not easy to untie.

Working with the community often encounters difficult situations, sometimes everyone agrees, but as long as one individual strongly opposes it, the project still cannot be implemented. - Quốc Đạt

There are a few playgrounds that seem to have an agreement in the community, but when the workers came to the site, they were hindered, so the projects could not be implemented. Or there are some places where the community said frankly that they don't want a playground there, though we both know their children will love the playground a lot. - Kim Đức [11]

To face this situation, Think Playgrounds does not choose to directly solve the bottlenecks but prioritizes their resources on the 'ready points' first - where there are favorable initial factors such as active individuals, motivated groups, or willing government. Playgrounds formed from 'ready points' are real-life examples of influencing public awareness about the lack of playgrounds and children's right to play. As perceptions change, needs will naturally arise and communities will actively seek to create the playground. Many communities have reached

out to Think Playgrounds this way, and each playground tells a different story.

In Ngoc Ha is a story about 'guerrilla' playgrounds. It took two years of connecting with the community to get the first playground here, which is just a seesaw placed in a small space located in the former garbage site, which later was transformed into a flower garden after many campaigning activities. Then, in another corner of the local market, Think Playgrounds gently managed to install 3 bouncy animal



Parklet in Tan Mai, Hanoi ■
(Photo: Think Playgrounds)

equipment. In another small corner at the People's Committee Center, a frog-shaped slide appeared. Gradually, Think Playgrounds made more complete playgrounds at the cultural house and Bay Gian lake in Ngoc Ha.

In Tan Mai is a story about resource diversity. Not being limited to financial aspects, Think Playgrounds' parklet project also receives a lot of support from existing resources in the community, with labor and plants brought from the balconies or terraces of residents.

In Dong Anh is a success story with the deep involvement of the Women Union with the pilot project of a playground for girls. Following up is a series of recycling playgrounds in partnership with the Dong Anh Women's Union, the non-profit organisation Live & Learn, and Goethe Institute. Besides, the smaller local governments in Dong Anh such as Hai Boi, Dai Mach also invited Think Playgrounds to implement playground projects from their self-funded resources.

CHANGES AND ORIENTATIONS

Following the set mission, from a group of amateur volunteers, Think Playgrounds gradually matured in the form of a social enterprise. It is a change in organisational structure. The call from the mission also has been bringing new elements to the content of Think Playgrounds' work.

From 2018, Think Playgrounds no longer only focuses on building playgrounds, but also expands its activities into the field of play theory. In the same year, Think Playgrounds' proposal 'Play Campaign' was approved by the Goethe Institute. The main idea of this campaign is to invite play experts from Europe to Hanoi, together with Think Playgrounds to organise seminars and training on the subject of play for parents and educators. This campaign introduces new concepts such as 'creative play', 'loose-part play', and 'adventurous play' [12].

The results of these theoretical activities provided new depth and ideas for future playgrounds, as Think Playgrounds began testing the first freestyle and adventure playground in Hanoi. Here, children are free to imagine and create their own games. Under adult supervision, children can play in a more adventurous way than usual, such as playing with fire, playing with water, using hammers, saws, nails, etc.

Exposure to controlled risks from an early age will help children face adulthood with greater composure, strength, and self-control, instead of living in fear and protection. [13]

In the longer term, Think Playgrounds wants their activities to have a big impact on policy. This goal serves the mission of protecting and speaking up for children's right to play. And when needed, Think Playgrounds is open to change and to adapt themselves to follow the set mission:

...Think Playgrounds can be a business that advocates for policy or specializes in supporting the government in playground development and implementation.

- Huệ Phương



Loose-part play in a Play Street event organised in Hanoi. ■
(Photo: Think Playgrounds)



■ Main space welcoming guests in Dốc Mờ Farm
(Photo: Dốc Mờ Farm)

FOREST GARDEN: WHEN AGRICULTURE AND LIFE STYLE RETURN TO NATURE

After more than 90 minutes of traveling from Saigon through scorching asphalt highways and concrete roads, from the first step into Dốc Mờ farm, I was immediately cooled down by the peaceful scenery of a small village: broad ponds, friendly cottages, vines below the shade of green fruit trees. Walking inside the welcoming building and the common kitchen, those who know about design may realise the attentiveness, thoroughness of the farm owner in every architectural detail. Looking at large scales, the stable truss is assembled from many slender wood bars which are intentionally kept in their natural shape. On smaller scales, all the bottom of pillars are protected from moisture and termites by metal pipes, and when I was washing my hand, I observed a small ledge designed to stop the overflowing water near the border of the cement sink.

When Dốc Mờ Farm's volunteers were arranging accommodation for new arrivals, Phạm Ngọc Thọ - Dốc Mờ Farm's managing director appeared and greeted everyone. My impression of Thọ is a healthy man with a "cool" look on a motorbike with a large fuel tank, at the same time, I found in his appearance something very genuine, a farmer with bright eyes, a Tânned

face hidden in the shade of a wide-brimmed straw hat. Thọ is lively but quiet. Sharing during the interview, Thọ often pondered, as if every word he said was drawn from his contemplation and the summary of a long journey.

CONCERN IN THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY AND A NUDGE FROM THE DESIGN INDUSTRY

Thọ belongs to the generation of the early 80s, he was born in a prosperous rural area in An Giang province. Thọ holds an imprinted imagination of his village as clusters of small houses along the river, fruit-laden orchards, vast rice fields, canals full of shrimp, crabs, snails, fish. Thọ grew up in such a peaceful and beautiful environment with the care of a community of ingenious farmers.

Tho studied architecture in Saigon during 1999-2004. This is also the period he witnessed the change of his hometown when the wave of urbanisation and industrialisation spread by. Most people in the working generation moved to the city or work in industrial zones nearby. Old people and children were left in the village.

The fields were abandoned, wild grass was overgrown, fruit trees in the garden were no longer cared for. Those who still worked in agriculture overused chemicals. Toxic substances in the field followed the water flows and reached into the canals and swales, as a result, aquatic species can no longer survive. Besides, Thọ also

noticed negative changes in cultural life. People were becoming more materialistic, everyone wanted to make a lot of money, relationships in the neighbourhood gradually faded away.

Being born in a farmers' family, Thọ was deeply concerned about the chemical methodology



■ Thọ is decorating a present for Tết before sending it to a client in Saigon
(Photo: Dốc Mơ Farm)

of the modern agricultural-economic model, as well as the tendency towards materialisation in rural life. He believes the cause of this inconvenient situation is the desire of the majority: most consumers desire delicious-beautiful-cheap food, while farmers desire an easy life in which their labour work is minimised and their income is maximised. Chemical fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, food preservatives... partly satisfy these needs in the short term, but they cause serious impacts on public health and the environment in the long term.

Thọ began to be interested in studying about other alternative ways of doing agriculture, such as organic agriculture, clean and chemicals-free agriculture, but Thọ mainly stopped at the level of interest as he had to spend most of his time working in the architecture industry in Saigon.

One day, Thọ received an invitation to design a family villa from a client in An Giang. The client was a wealthy retailer in the pesticide and chemical fertiliser business. To prepare for the design, he took Thọ to visit some mansions of his friends who were working in the same industry. Thọ was shocked by the luxury of these wealthy men in the chemical business, who are

willing to spend tens of billions to have a satisfactory mansion. The trip to An Giang made the existing concerns in Thọ even more intense, as he shared in the interview:

*The chemical sellers are rich, they have plenty of time in the morning to drink coffee, to chat about business, in the afternoon, they gather again for feast dinner and alcohol because their staff take care of everything. Why are these men happy in wealth while the farmers are getting poor. I see something's wrong here.**

It can be seen that this experience gave Thọ a broader perspective on the overall picture of the agricultural industry. The picture has two contrasting sides. On one hand, farmers are continuously staying in poverty and misery with the growing risks in health because their farming practices make them more and more dependent on chemicals. On the other hand, there is a class becoming increasingly wealthy thanks to this dependence. They are 'the traders' in the chemical industry.

This contrast is the reason that made Thọ feel wrong about and brought him motivation to take action. Thọ discussed this concern with his

* All direct quotes in this chapter, if not further explained, are taken from research interviews in May 2020 or September 2021.

wife and they decided to step into the field of agriculture. They want to make some changes in this industry and find a feasible way towards non-chemical farming that protects the environment and the health of farmers. The journey of Dốc Mờ Farm started here.

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE OLD WAY

The journey towards agriculture began with visits to organic farm models in Hanoi and many places across the country. Thọ got the initial lessons about farming in a way that saves resources and is self-sustained. For example, the story of vegetables: vegetables in good shape are for sale, vegetables in lower condition are left for the community, the leftovers are used to feed cows, and then cow dung becomes fertiliser for vegetables. Thọ observed in organic models the way farmers do hand-weeding and make bio-fences to protect their farms from chemical sprays from nearby gardens, as well as how organic farming uses flowers to distract insects from crops instead of using pesticide and chemical fertiliser. Through this journey, Thọ also gained experience about the current difficulties in many organic farms such as seeking a position in the market and other problems in model management or team working. Most importantly, in these real-life examples, Thọ finds faith in the way ahead. He believes that it is possible for farmers to have

a good life with non-chemical agriculture, just like the way farmers in An Giang used to live when he was a boy.

After these visits, Thọ and his friends returned to find a site for their own farm in the vicinity of Saigon. After a hard time looking for a place that meets the initial targets: far away from 'highly industrialized and urbanized', 'not being flooded in future' with 'a little hilly terrain', Thọ decided to rent a 1ha land in Dốc Mờ, Đồng Nai to implement his pilot work. Looking back, Thọ reflected that he was still a bit confused at this time as there is something in the visited organic farms that unsatisfied him.

Continuing to read more materials on agriculture, Thọ found the book 'One Straw Revolution' by chance. The book author is Mr Fukuoka - a Japanese philosopher, and also a practitioner of 'natural agriculture'. The book helped Thọ re-organise his views on agriculture and lifestyle, making him realise the profound sustainability of the traditional farming methods. Thọ realised the model he was seeking is far beyond non-chemical agriculture. More deeply, he wants to restore the beauty of the traditional culture, when people still knew how to rely on nature, rely on each other and communities. With this realisation, Thọ believes the 'organic farming as usual' is just at the boundary of the non-chemical approach. By pursuing the mass of crops, this model can still be devastating to nature. Thọ

saw a clear example of this statement in some of the farms he visited when investors leveled hills and existing trees to build large greenhouses to protect their crops from extreme weather and insects.

Thọ believes the truly sustainable agriculture model shares the vision of 'natural farming' from Fukuoka. This model is not out of reach, as Thọ can learn from the diverse garden of his grandparents in the past - a garden with many kinds of woody plants, fruit trees, perennial crops, medicinal herbs and annual vegetations. In general, Thọ wants to build a 'forest garden' which not only serves the needs of humans but also can be the home for many other species. Thọ sees biodiversity as the key element for a healthy garden, so wild grasses are welcomed in Dốc Mờ Farm. Thọ also believes that people will be more peaceful, relationships in the community will be tightened when farmers choose the natural lifestyle.

When the direction was clear, in 2018, Thọ and his associates decided to buy a few plots of land in the surrounding area to lead Dốc Mờ to the 'food forest' model. In 2021, the area of Dốc Mờ is 14 hectares.

BRINGING INDIVIDUAL DREAMS INTO COMMON REALITY

It would be remiss not to mention the balance between openness and selection in the way Dốc Mờ Farm gathers resources. Thanks to this way of building resources, Dốc Mờ Farm reached a scale of 14 hectares with independent and interconnected activities such as planting, breeding, welcoming visitors, processing and selling agricultural products.

Many friends of Thọ shared a dream about a garden house in a rural area, where they can live a peaceful life that is close to nature while the fresh food for their family is secured. However, many of them have no experience in farming, plus the difficulties in maintaining and managing the model, so that wish had never come true. Bringing resources together to buy land makes things easier, besides, the group's shared garden will be more spacious and the master plan is better overall. This intention became more feasible because the group has members who are committed and responsive like Thọ. Because the initial investors do not put the business first, Dốc Mờ Farm does not have to carry the burden of capital recovery, so that Thọ and his co-workers can confidently aim for their long-term goals.

Starting with such an open cooperation mechanism, the important principle that Dốc Mờ

Farm always keeps is to require participants to contribute their time and energy to bear a part of the responsibility in the farm work. In addition to financial contributions, commitment and work sharing are important factors that help Dốc Mờ Farm select companions:

Whoever wants to live on the farm should also contribute, because staying here without support will be a burden for the farm... Dốc Mờ Farm aims to build a community of residents working together, depending on their capacity.

Thọ called Dốc Mờ Farm model as a 'new type of cooperative', similar to a joint-stock company. Members contribute their resources and their income is dependent on their contribution level. The number of members is also flexible as change is accepted in Dốc Mờ Farm. Those who change direction, or are unable to invest further may withdraw, making room for newcomers. For Thọ, as long as people discuss and communicate clearly with each other in the early stages, later on, the change in shareholder is normal and natural, because the personal path is not always predictable.



■ Bungalow for guests in Dốc Mờ Farm.
(Photo: Dốc Mờ Farm)

Currently, there are 5 shareholders who are in charge of different departments at Dốc Mờ Farm. Thọ is in charge of general management and farm guests, one investor is in charge of cultivation and livestock, the other is working on the construction, while agricultural product processing and sales are implemented by the other two shareholders.

NO RUSH IN SOLVING DIFFICULTIES

Despite having initial advantages in key members and collective start-up resources, a different way of farming like Dốc Mờ Farm has never been an easy choice. Thọ aspires to create a decent model to prove that a farmer can live a good life in a forest garden with a stable income. But this intention soon encountered challenges when the number of agricultural products collected in the early years was very limited. This is a common situation with most of the farms in the direction of natural farming because the land at the beginning has not yet recovered, while the experience and gardening skills of the 'apprentice farmers' are limited. Other familiar difficulties for Dốc Mờ Farm are weather and pests. Thọ determined that it takes 5 to 7 years for the soil and the biological system to restore equilibrium in Dốc Mờ Farm, then the number of agricultural products collected will meet expectations.

The solution to maintaining the model during this difficult period is receiving visitors in farm stay and organising events on the farm. This approach brings unexpected positive effects. By directly observing how the farm operates, interacting with a variety of plants and animals at Dốc Mờ Farm, visitors have a lot of fun and experiences. Many of them later became close customers of Dốc Mờ Farm. However, Thọ does not want to focus too many resources on receiving guests. He determined that the root of Dốc Mờ Farm must be located in the garden. He and the members need to avoid being distracted by things that are "side-effects". Therefore, Dốc Mờ Farm only accepts a maximum of 50 people per batch. On the other hand, Thọ seems to be very picky. He only chooses customers who understand the values of Dốc Mờ Farm. Instead of being served like regular accommodation models, visitors must be self-catering for most of their time and stay at Dốc Mờ Farm for at least 2-3 days.

In the sale of agricultural products, Dốc Mờ Farm chooses to sell directly at the farm or via Facebook Fanpage to shorten the supply chain as much as possible. This may take more time and human resources, but ensures close communication and relationships with customers. In addition, Dốc Mờ Farm also processes agricultural products to supply a few reputable stores in Saigon.



■ The packages for Dốc Mơ Farm's products are environmental friendly.
(Photo: Dốc Mơ Farm)



THE HINGES THAT KEEP THE DOOR SLOWLY OPEN

Regarding personnel, Dốc Mơ Farm's difficulty is instability. Thọ uses the word 'precarious' to describe this situation. Many young people are interested in sustainable agriculture and want to try out models like Dốc Mơ Farm. However, going long-term is another story. Many volunteers came and left. Currently, there are 7-8 young staff who want to work long-term for Dốc Mơ Farm. This number is still modest compared to Thọ's expectations. He estimates that Dốc Mơ Farm needs 20-30 people to work. Therefore, Dốc Mơ Farm often has to hire local farmers, but this resource fluctuates by season and is also unstable.

Another difficulty of human resources is labour efficiency. In fact, the volunteers and staff of Dốc Mơ Farm are not as productive as the farmers at work. To have a better result in optimisation, hiring farmers to do everything can be an answer, but Dốc Mơ Farm still maintains volunteers and staff to work on the field. With Thọ, the intention of training is more important, Thọ shared:

...I want volunteers to have a chance to practice more so that their skills are trained, though their productivity is not as good as the farmers here... If they decide to follow agriculture, if they are passionate about farming, I will train them and pass on my experience so they can work independently in the future.

Dốc Mơ Farm is approaching an important stage that Thọ mentioned quite often in the interview in May 2020. It is the time when Thọ starts to feel 'the garden is stable', 'green and prosperous', 'the farming skills are solid'. The soil in Dốc Mơ Farm has gradually recovered and is much more fertile than its beginning state. Thọ often mentions that 'agriculture must be the foundation'. Up to now, that foundation is a solid hinge for the door of Dốc Mơ Farm to gradually open to the outside.

Locally, the efforts of Dốc Mơ Farm were initially well-received. The local government is concerned about the overuse of chemicals in agriculture in the area, but have yet to find an effective solution. Therefore, they wholeheartedly support a non-chemical agricultural model like Dốc Mơ Farm. They want to see Dốc Mơ Farm becoming a model of their region. Besides, after a period of listening and observing Dốc Mơ Farm, some farmers in the village have expressed their wish to cooperate with Thọ in cultivating some agricultural products.

On the side of Dốc Mơ Farm, although orders are increasing, Thọ does not advocate the growth of the production system in the garden to suit the needs of the market, he prefers to

collaborate with farmers in the nearby area. Thọ is convincing local farmers to follow his chemical-free approach, both by talking and by example through a practical model at Dốc Mờ Farm. This is a process that cannot be rushed, Thọ shared that one of the most important factors is to ensure output for farmers:

The farmers love the idea of farming without chemicals because everyone sees the negative effect of chemicals on their own health. But they are also very afraid of wasting their time on the new way of farming and then could not sell

their crops in the end, they worry about income. Because growing without chemicals, the yield is not high and the appearance is not as beautiful as products using chemicals, market traders do not buy it at a high price for sure. If I promise to buy all the non-chemical products that they grow, farmers will definitely follow non-chemical farming.

Therefore, as long as the farmer honestly does not use chemicals in farming, Thọ will ensure to purchase the output products, even though the appearance of agricultural products in the early



■ Dốc Mờ Farm's products
(Photo: Dốc Mờ Farm)

stages may not be attractive. The process is still in its early stages, however, the fact that chemical-free gardens are slowly spreading around Dốc Mờ Farm is an encouraging prospect.

Besides the good relationship with the local government and local farmers, Dốc Mờ Farm also supports the consumption of agricultural products for like-minded people in agriculture. At the time of writing, the 'One Straw Revolution' movement is flourishing in Vietnam. Agriculture

and 'natural lifestyle' are getting more attention, many people are leaving cities to return to their hometowns to establish different models of 'forest garden'. In the beginning, they often have difficulties in selling products. With its well-known brand, Dốc Mờ Farm has become a bridge between natural farmers in the area and customers in Saigon and many places across the country.

Being thorough in choosing guests, but Thọ seems to be quite open to individuals and or-



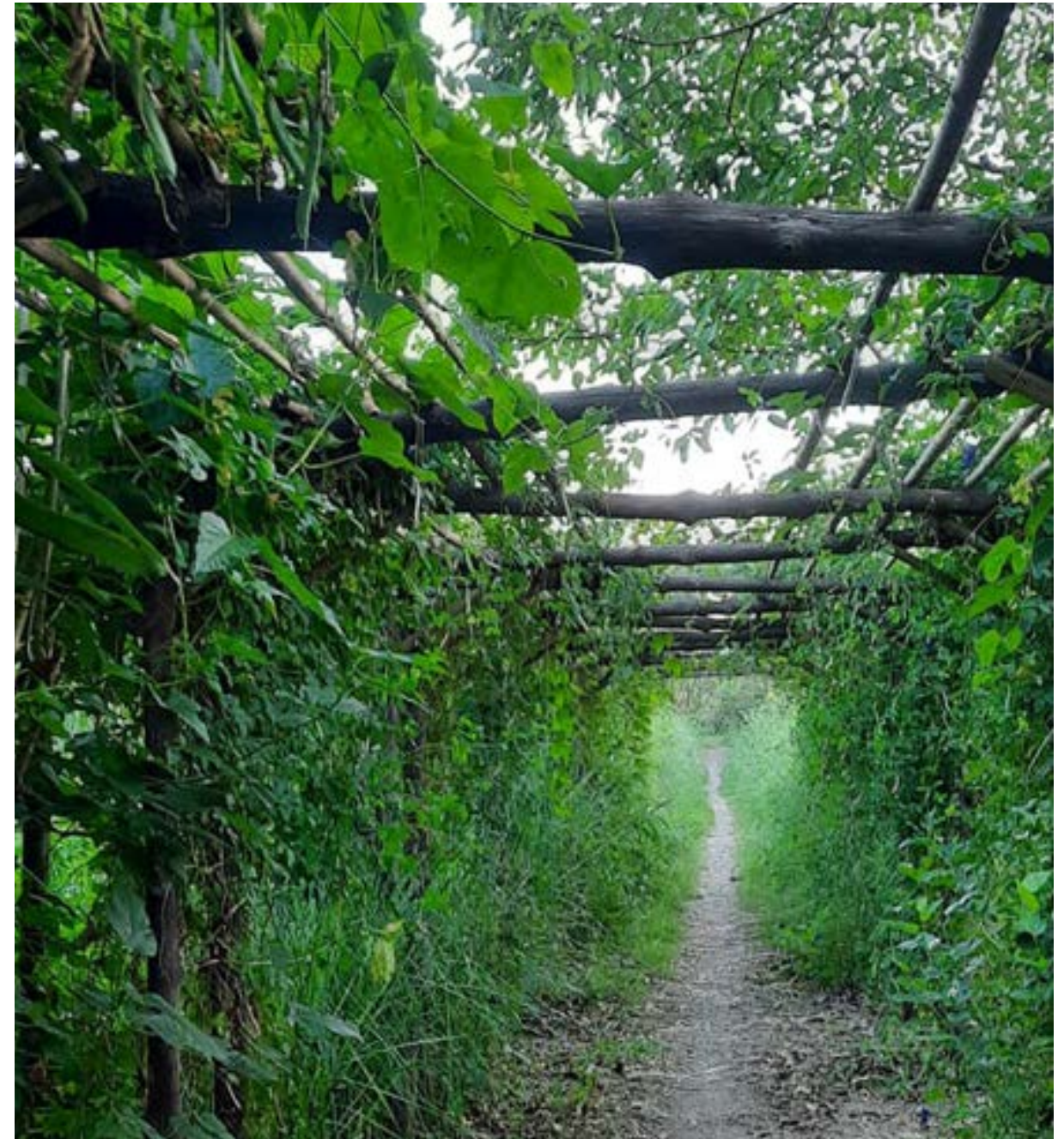
■ The event 'catching fish in pond' in Dốc Mờ Farm attracts many families with kids.
(Photo: Dốc Mờ Farm)

ganisations who came to Dốc Mờ Farm for educational purposes. Many visitors who come to Dốc Mờ Farm are elementary schools, Steiner schools or schools that encourage their pupils to spend a lot of time playing and interacting with nature. Thọ commented on this 'customer file':

They do not bring much income for Dốc Mờ Farm, however, spreading awareness about nature and farming is a great thing. We always welcome educational organisations.

The goal of supporting education is also reflected in Thọ's future orientation for the garden. Thọ wants to dedicate a large area of land to grow a botanical garden, focusing on a variety of native plants that are being lost in many places. This garden is a great cherished intention of Thọ and it brought a lot of inspiration for other members to contribute. The garden is accumulating new plants every year, Thọ hopes that in the near future, that botanical garden can be opened to welcome students, helping them have more experiences and knowledge of the natural world and its beauty, which is fragile to human impact.

At the time of the interview, Thọ's journey with Dốc Mờ Farm had already been 5 years. This is not a long time for a "forest garden", but this period is enough for Thọ to gain a rich experience in agriculture, determine a long-term vision for the farm, as well as know-how to implement that vision. There are still difficulties and questions which are not easy to answer, but the door of Dốc Mờ Farm is gradually opening to the outside. May this opening bring Thọ and his associates new opportunities and necessary knowledge on the way to finding sustainable change in agriculture.



■ A pathway through the garden in Dốc Mờ Farm.
(Photo: Dốc Mờ Farm)



■ The courtyard in Sạp chàng Sen.
(Photo: Sạp chàng Sen)

PERSONAL IMPRINT IN THE BUSINESS: WHEN CONNECTIONS ARE THE INSPIRATION AND DRIVING FACTOR

*In the middle of a big, big city - a small, small stall
In the middle of a small, small stall - a big, big yard*

These lines are part of a brief self-introduction about the location and space of Sạp Chàng Sen* - a shop selling 'green - clean - healthy'[14] products which are known to many young people who care about the environment on the shop website. Sạp chàng Sen is modestly located on the ground floor of an apartment building in Thanh Cong, Hanoi. The entrance to the store is hidden by a stair and connects to an old, somewhat dark and damp hallway. Many first-time visitors could be surprised by the clean, bright space inside the store and the large, airy courtyard behind.

When I step into the shop, I am impressed with the gentle, relaxing scent from handmade products with pure natural ingredients. The scent leads me to a burned incense of an exotic type extracted from Vetiver grass neatly arranged

* Mr. Sen's Stall

on a dark, old wooden slat table. Next to it are carefully folded cardboard boxes of an aroma diffuser that smells like soil and roots. A little further is a multi-tiered, thick pine shelf holding a sophisticated and diverse collection of scented candles. Following this pine shelf to the corner of the room, I pause for a long time to enjoy discovering the private world of essential oils hidden in tiny glass jars, placed solemnly on wood log rounds which still have the colour of the bark with a white, thin but flat linen cloth gently lining underneath.

The scent continues to lead me to wander from corner to corner through the stall. In every corner, it is easy to find beautiful and fragrant products meticulously wrapped in friendly packaging from paper, cardboard, wood or indigo dyed fabric. Even empty bottles of different sizes, shapes and materials that customers could use to store refillable products* are nicely packed in cardboard boxes.

The spirit demonstrated in the rustic but thoughtful layout of every little detail suggests that the owner of Sạp chàng Sen is an aesthetic and meticulous person. An interview with Ân Đăng - the founder and operator of Sạp

confirmed this. It showed me more interesting angles about this characteristic but approachable guy.

INSPIRED BY SIMPLE CONNECTIONS AT COUNTRYSIDE STALL

I remember the fairs in the countryside in the North, with small stalls selling some local seasonal products. People brought what they had to the market. They came to the market not only to buy and sell stuff but also to talk to each other. Ân open and sincere life... [15]

These simple self-introductions clearly describe the spirit of Sạp chàng Sen while explaining this somewhat strange name. First, 'Stall' shows Ân's orientation towards a small and modest store. Ân wishes that Sạp is not only a place to buy and sell but also to connect consumers with the producers, the raw material area and the rhyme of nature through the product seasons. Ân hopes that people coming to Sạp can connect with each other in a close and sincere way, which seem to be fading in the city these

* Refillable products have no packaging and aim to reduce waste. The price of a refillable product is usually calculated based on its weight. Customers bring their own containers to store products or borrow containers from the store. Examples of common types of refillable products are laundry detergent, mouthwash, salt, sugar, etc.

days. Through the name and the development of Sạp, Ân wants to re-introduce the simple but meaningful features of a rural stall into the heart of Hanoi.

The spirit of human connection is reflected in the way Sạp* interacts with customers. Visiting the shop's website and Facebook, many customers will feel enlightened and welcomed as they read articles, posts or announcements. Whether short and long, they all have a soft and friendly voice, as if they come from a friend who is sitting next to you and sharing with you what they have.

Efforts to connect consumers with producers and raw material areas are reflected in the way Sạp provides product information. As a rule, information about the producers and raw material areas is prioritized and placed at the top of every post. Sạp's staff also frequently emphasizes this information when they give advice to customers at Sạp. Access to this information is available for all products of Sạp.

The presence of products on Sạp is not too dependent on the season but the rhythm of nature is often emphasized in the way Sạp communicates. In the spring, Sạp actively provides posts

about cosmetic lines from pomelo flowers and Phong Huong pollen. In the summer, there are oral care products made from betel leaves and yellow flower buttons. In the fall, there is orchid soap and in winter there are products to keep the body warm.

Besides, elements connecting people, raw material areas, products and crops are often integrated and interwoven in Sạp's articles. Here is an example.

...Last time before the Lunar New Year, bananas were sold out. Therefore, right after the holiday, Sạp immediately called Mr Thang to order. But it took time. Ms Anh – with her still sweet voice - eagerly said over the phone: "I have bananas but they are waiting for ripening, then waiting to dry. I can send them to you in two weeks."

*If you want delicious food, you must be patient. So, we are patiently waiting for the batch of bananas to arrive. Early this morning, the package from Ninh Thuan arrived at Sạp. That sweet smell of bananas. We just need to open the box to know what's inside...***

* Sạp chàng Sen will be briefly referred to as Sạp.

** All direct quotes in this chapter, if not further explained, are taken from research interviews in May 2020 or from Facebook Post in August 19th 2021.

In this paragraph, we see the close relationship between Sáp, the distributor, and Ms Anh, the producer. At the same time, the relationship between the product and the natural rhythm of the raw material area is clearly shown through the patient waiting for the right ripeness of Ninh Thuan bananas.

An chose for his Stall the position of a distributor in the supply chain of 'green - clean - healthy' products, and at the same time found meanings in the connecting function of sale. Analyzing the relationship among consumers, distributors, producers, raw material areas and crops can help outsiders to see more clearly the motivation of Ân and his colleagues at Sáp. Perhaps for insiders, these connections have become a part of everyday life and merged into natural and gentle stories like the example above.

**BUSINESS:
IT TAKES TIME TO CONNECT
CONSUMERS WITH NEW NEEDS
AND STEPS TO CHANGE.**

Ân's journey with Sáp begins with his frustration with the problem of plastic waste. He buys stainless steel straws to give to restaurants and cafes to replace disposable plastic straws. After a period "eating at home, carrying community duties" without getting the desired effect, Ân

felt that it was necessary to have a longer-term approach.

Ân started his business with the belief that he could rely on the supply-demand relationship in the market to make positive changes: 'I can't go begging people to change. We have to make it a product in the market and create a demand for it like any other good, and the buyers will change'. Offering quality eco-friendly products can create new demand and form sustainable consumption habits. In turn, sustainable consumption needs and habits will be the driving force for the market to have more green products and more environmentally responsible producers.

Ân is aware that change needs to come from individuals. This takes time and steps. Ân shared:

Everyone needs periods of change... Everyone will have these periods, and they need alternatives. And in the process, they look for answers or maybe questions will arise and their perception will be different.

To say these things, Ân's worldview has been through stages of transformation. At first, Ân admitted that he was a bit extreme and could easily get "angry with the world", judge and criticize others for consumption habits that were unfriendly to the environment. Ân used

to be self-contradictory when he sold alternative products such as stainless steel straws and sugarcane containers to organisations but refused to sell this product to many individuals. The reason was that while these products are more environment-friendly, their production still emits greenhouse gases and consumes resources. After their use expires, the products still become garbage. Ân wished each individual 'change and become self-conscious' and stop using unnecessary products because reducing is better than reusing and recycling. Ân

realized that he had the habit of using a lot of plastic, including plastic bags, foam containers and disposable chopsticks because he did not want to wash dishes, especially when many friends visit him at home. It took Ân a long time to become an individual who cares about and takes action for the environment.

This realization makes Ân take things easier. Not everyone can change right away. If many individuals' lifestyle change journey needs 'steps', Ân and his Stall in the role of a dis-



■ A small fair at Sáp.
(Photo: Sáp chàng Sen)

tributor will support these 'steps'. The current products of Sáp provide the steps for different groups. Let's look at a few groups:

The least environmentally friendly group are some foods that are packed in plastic or in materials containing plastic. Their process and ingredients, however, are clean and healthy with no preservatives. A little more environment-friendly group of products is contained in reusable glass and ceramic jars such as candles, essential oils, and jams. For some products of this group, there is a policy for returning packaging and containers to the producers. The group of alternative products has products made from pure natural materials such as bamboo brushes and grass straws. Recently, Sáp developed a 'refillable' product group to reduce packaging waste. This product group is quite diverse, covering foods such as sugar and salt to tomato-fermented detergents.

It is difficult to properly delineate the product lines at Sáp. However, the above groups show that Sáp has been more open to many customers with different 'stepping' needs. Meanwhile, it has continued to distribute products that are friendly to the environment and human health.

WHEN CONNECTIONS WITH PRODUCERS REPLACE MERE PRODUCT CONCERNS

By the end of 2018, Sáp shifted its focus from searching for environmentally friendly products to cooperating with producers who care about protecting the ecosystem. This may not be obvious to many customers but for Sáp, this was a turning point because from now on, it has more companions who share the same values. Also, thanks to this move, the products at Sáp become more diverse because each producer often has many different products.

Sáp and ecological producers reach out to each other in many ways depending on the circumstances and initiatives of each party. The relationship always began with sincere conversations:

...I'm not going to import and sell right away. I start by asking. Ask about its ingredients and process, and ask like a conversation between two friends: what kind of spirit do you want? What are you doing this for? What do you see in it? In fact, when selling their products, I know this person made them for money, that person made them for other goals towards their ideal...

Among the producers who care about the ecosystem, Sáp often prioritises connection with small producers because Ân knows they need Sáp more. Large producers can develop their own distribution channels, while small producers often have difficulty introducing products to the market. However, in running Sáp, Ân determined that the key lies in the quality of the products he sells. No matter what the story behind the product is, Sáp cannot accept it for sale if its quality is not good. Ân said, 'The quality of the project must come first and its meaning comes second'. While registration for product quality inspection is close to mandatory for large producers, it is difficult to register handmade products from small brands for inspection. This is because of the unaffordable testing costs and efforts involved. Obviously, quality control is a challenge. With products labelled green - environmentally friendly, this challenge is even greater because the assessment process needs to be carried out over the entire product life cycle from raw materials to the production process, to finished products, not to mention the distribution phase.

Faced with the above quality control challenge, Ân built a standard system for Sáp, relying mainly on his personal experience. This somewhat subjective system of standards is by no means sloppy because its creators are meticulous as Ân sees himself. Ân wants to build trust in customers, 'when I have tested it, it means quality.'

To experience the quality of the finished product, Ân must first be a user. With the experience of a former cook, Ân's taste buds are sensitive to food. With Ân, even if food is certified for safety, it must still be delicious. Products such as palm sugar, salt and pepper, and rice have to pass Ân's delicious and safe standards before being sold at Sáp. With products that Ân cannot use, for example, product lines for women, Ân usually takes feedback from at least three users before deciding to accept them for sale.

Besides, Ân spent a large amount of his time tracking the product life cycle. Ân personally experienced the production process. He visited raw material areas in person, whether they are as close as the northern provinces for herbal products, or as far away as Long Ân in the case of grass products. Ân wants to understand how materials are collected. He directly talked to workers and was willing to try the role of a worker to see how products were made. For example, when he developed criteria for organic soap products, Ân attended some soap-making courses to understand 'what ratio makes this, where the hardness comes from, and what types of oils people use'.

Obviously, the shift of focus to accompanying producers has brought new colours to Sáp along with challenges in understanding and evaluating product quality. Ân's enthusiasm in learning about products has crossed the line of

quality control purposes, because distributors do not have to make products to gain sufficient understanding to sell them. For Ân, with a special joy in gaining a deep understanding of how to create products, the seemingly dry quality inspection has become an interesting journey of learning and knowledge expansion.

INSPIRATION AND PRINCIPLES

Ân admits that he is a dreamer, preferring to live by inspiration. This has partly been shown in the previous sections, through the ways Ân arranges Sạp, builds connections with customers and partners, and his fascination with the process of making beautiful, quality handmade products. In the second half of the interview, I discovered more stories related to this attribute of Sạp's owner.



■ Visiting an organic cashew garden in Ninh Thuan.
(Photo: Sạp chàng Sen)

Still related to the layout, there are different product lines under the theme of alternative products and green consumption at Sạp. These are decorative product lines such as ceramics and wooden sculptures. On being asked about these products, Ân said he used this product line for decoration purposes. For Ân, his store must be exquisite. 'You can't go to an ugly store!', Ân shared.

The packaging also shows the aesthetic spirit of Sạp. Ân wanted 'the package sent out is like a gift – neat, tidy and gorgeous', 'the product must be in the most perfect state when it is dispatched from Sạp' and was disappointed at the opinion that 'a package with just enough information is fine.'

On the other hand, despite having learned and known about targeting media audiences and its marketing impacts, Ân showed little interest in targeting a few specific customers. This is because Ân dislikes the 'tricks' and 'pressures' of this job. More importantly, Ân feels that identifying customers in advance would take away the joy and unpredictable elements from his journey:

It's not fun when you target like this. It's like when you walk on a road, knowing every single tree that on that road, there is nothing to observe.

Each of the stories above shows the intersections between inspiration and principle when the desire to pursue beauty and decorum becomes a common standard for Sạp operation. The desire to 'have fun' leads to the denial of business principles that can help increase sales. Balancing inspiration and principles is not simple, as Ân admits:

Even though I know that I am a dreamer I follow principles when I work. So how to have harmony? It's a hard thing to this day I'm still learning how to work with people.

Sharing more, Ân realises that his work principles involve credibility and self-esteem which are shown by meeting his commitments. Ân is aware of possible misunderstandings about words, so he always tries to make things as clear as possible when communicating with the staff. He stated firmly, 'It is not might be, maybe, or I think that or I feel that. Fifteen is fifteen. To make it clear and avoid ambiguity.' When the information was clear, Ân asked himself and all associates to take responsibility for their commitments. This can be considered as a non-negotiable principle.

During the development of Sạp, some non-negotiable principles were relaxed such as the principle of no plastic, i.e. not selling any products with plastic packaging. Currently, Sạp has determined that 'some products raise other

products' so it has accepted a compromise, deciding to sell some products that are not as green as it originally intended. Ân divides products at Sạp into different lines, i.e. profit-generating products, green lifestyle-generating products and decorative products. These product lines rely on each other, helping Sạp to go through the precarious periods towards a long way for consumption style changes because "lifestyle cannot change overnight". On that long journey, upholding the original values is still the focus of the decisions of Ân and his associates at Sạp.

CONNECTION: FROM INITIAL INSPIRATION TO DRIVING FACTOR

The past journey shows that connections play a central role in the orientation and development of Sạp chàng Sen. In essence, this journey is always associated with Ân's personal changes because, for Ân, Sạp has always been a place to 'practice what I believe in and care about'. To arrange the connections in chronological order, I would like to use Ân's way of dividing Sạp's journey into three chapters: 'I', 'I and Suppliers'; 'I, Suppliers and Customers'.

Chapter 1 - 'I' is the beginning stage. Ân established Sạp chàng Sen page in 2016 with inspiration from simple but meaningful connections

in rural stalls. These connections were a model for Ân to look at when starting a business. The choice of business also came from the desire to connect customers to new demands and steps towards lifestyle changes. However, Ân admitted that his grip on ego was tight in this period, making his attitudes and views somewhat 'extreme.' He could 'easily get angry with the world' when interacting with people who did not share the same values. Thus, the connections that Ân was aiming for seemed to be somewhere 'outside', when 'inside' Ân remained closed.

The second chapter – 'I and Suppliers' began when Ân realized the root problems in the very alternative products which he was selling. They were related to toxic waste in the production process or emission factors in the transportation of imported products. Instead of using remote production areas, Ân was aware that 'I need to go with small domestic producers, closest to me, where processes have a low impact on the environment and good products'. This desire to 'go along' gave a new focus to sales- supporting producers who shared the same values with Sạp in the country. Connections gradually formed as Ân became more open and his ego's grasp gradually loosened. The sale was still leisurely, mainly 'for fun', and profit was not a matter of great concern.

The third chapter - 'I, Suppliers and Customers' began at the end of 2019 when Ân thought

about 'doing things seriously' to sustain. This intention occurred when Sạp became an important link in the network of consumers, producers and raw material areas. Producers needed Sạp as an outlet for their products. Customers trusted and felt secure with the products introduced by Sạp. They provided feedback on some inconveniences of Sạp such as slightly crumpled reusable packaging and delayed delivery as Sạp collected orders by district to limit emissions and facilitate collection of used packaging. The relationship between Sạp, the suppliers and the customers became closer at this stage. The connections that Ân aimed at were no longer 'external' like a dream in the first chapter of a start-up. They have been internalized as a daily reality at Sạp. I am forever impressed with Ân's following sharing:

If there had been another choice, I wouldn't have developed a stall. I wouldn't have chosen to sell products. However, I happened to talk to the suppliers. I happened to talk to the workers. I happened to know that what I was doing was good. I want to do it. I want to sell those products so the suppliers can survive and thrive.

Here, I see a sacrifice of personal freedom when Ân's inspired ego had to give more room to business principles and decisions because now Sạp no longer sells for fun but for the responsibilities to its accompanied producers and the trust that customers have given to Sạp.

Being strict and principled at work, Ân finds that he is more open inside, because "the opportunity to meet many individuals" helps Ân "learn to be more empathetic, less extreme, more open-minded and more understanding.' It seems that the closer and deeper the connections are around Sạp, the lesser Ân's grip on his personal ego is and the closer he comes to the original values set out. Thinking about Sạp and connections, I can relate to the topic question that guides the first part of Charles Eiseinsteins' book 'Sacred Economics': 'How instead money has come to generate scarcity rather than abundance, separation rather than connection'*. I see another reality in the story of Sạp, where money no longer plays the central role often seen in businesses but has become a tool to nurture meaningful, multi-layered connections between distributors, customers, producers and raw material areas. These connections nourish Ân's mind and

* In "Sacred Economics," Charles Eiseinsteins analyses the history of money from ancient times to modern capitalism. He pointed out that the original purpose of money was sacred as it was used to connect people. The contemporary economic-political system, however, has used the money to create division, competition and scarcity in society.

heart. In turn, inner transformations enrich the connections.

I believe that the changes inside Ân will continue to lead him in the right direction on the long way. However, the immediate difficulty is to overcome the impacts of the Covid-19 epidemic. In a July 2020 interview, Ân only 'hopes that I can survive until the end of the year'. As I followed Sạp chàng Sen on Facebook in the last days of August 2021, fortunately, I still saw the image of a busy guy. Ân was no longer buying and giving away stainless steel straws to businesses like the first day. He was trying to properly pack packages to courier them when online orders were increasing daily because Customers could not come to Sạp during the lockdowns in Hanoi. Along with that are other positive signals. Sạp still maintains support for a forest garden project in Sapa, offers vouchers for customers with limited financial conditions, and discounts for individuals who join hands to support Covid-19 patients.



■ Ân with Sạp's clients.
(Photo: Sạp chàng Sen)



■ Thảo with natural dyed fabrics.
(Photo: Kilomet109)

(HI)STORY OF THE GARMENTS: TRADITION, CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND INNOVATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

I hastened across the porch to Cà Phê Thứ Bảy (Saturday Coffee), a coffee shop situated on Trần Xuân Soạn street that hosted public intellectual and cultural events in Hanoi every week before the Corona outbreak. This week of Cà Phê Thứ Bảy Trẻ (Young Saturday Coffee)* talk series featured Vũ Thảo on traditional hand-craft and eco-fashion design. Walking into the main hall upstairs full of audience, I found myself obviously a few minutes late for the talk. A mini-documentary was being screened and about to reach the end. The last scene portrayed a group of ethnic minority women looking for a long piece of indigo dyed fabric floating out of their grip while they were washing dyed textiles in the stream cutting across a paddy field. One of the women in the documentary caught my attention. Though one could tell from her facial characteristics that she might not belong to the ethnic minority, her outfit and then behaviour can help her to easily blend into the group. She was wearing a blue loose outfit with the shirt sleeves and pant legs rolled up, standing in the water and looking for the lost fabric in

all the possible directions in the stream, just like other women. In the end, she beamed widely when the cloth was finally found. To the right of the big screen, Thảo was sitting in a chair on the stage, calmly watching herself and slightly smiled at the fun moment in the documentary.

Contrary to a cold, distanced and aesthetic image of fashion designers in fashion shows or magazine covers I usually saw, Thảo looked relaxed and convivial both on the screen and in real life. After the talk that Saturday night, I managed to squeeze myself in her tight schedule for a research interview with her about the youth ecological movement in Vietnam. I was mind-blown by her stories of cultural preservation, impeccable ability to articulate her ideas and charismatic vibes. I came back home from her studio by Hồ Tây (West Lake) after our inspirational talk, reflecting on our Vietnamese traditional cultures and national identity embodied by the way we dress, the materials we use and the clothes patterns and design we aspire. What impressed me most was her ar-

* This talk took place at No. 45 Tran Xuan Soan, Hanoi on 11th July 2020.

gument on the powers of traditional textiles in the interrelationships of nature, humans and things throughout centuries in political, social and cultural worlds. Therefore, textile heritage, as she said, needed to be preserved. What she was doing with her fashion brand Kilomet109 [16] committed to this cause, together with her desires to ease climate change impacts and establish a Vietnamese luxury fashion label on national and global scale.

Kilomet109, founded by Vũ Thảo in 2012, claimed to produce high quality garments from natural fabric, using traditional techniques and contemporary design. The sustainable pieces of clothing receive recognition from local and international markets for their ecological philosophy, cultural preservation efforts, and utilitarian and aesthetic design. The garments, from the production of raw fiber and natural dyes, to the making of textiles, design and finishing and consumption, are enmeshed in the assemblage of the environment, cultures, people and things and tell the stories of the people and objects involved in the making processes, exchange, consumption and adaptation.

The social life of the garments* intersects with the stories of cultural preservation and innova-

tion, community building, national identification and globalization. This helps to demonstrate and, simultaneously, shape the ecological movements explicitly and subtly taking place in Vietnam and in the world amid climate change. Therefore, this chapter aims to tell the (hi)story of the garments produced by the humans of Kilomet109 in cooperation with the natural and cultural actors. By tracing the trajectories of the pieces of clothing, we hope to uncover the complexity and dynamics of interconnectedness of humans and other beings and the tensions between such dichotomies as the local and global, the traditional and the modern, the scalable and unscalable, the authenticity and hybridity and the individuality and collectivity.

FROM THE GROUND UP

Kilomet109 is well-known for their close production cycle. Instead of buying the available materials, Thảo went to her suppliers' villages, lived and directly worked with indigenous artisans and participated in the production of raw fiber, natural dyes and fabric making. Most used fibers are hemp, cotton and silk with natural dyes from indigo, yam roots and ebony fruit.

* Inspired by Appadurai's 'The Social Life of Things' (1986) and Kopytoff's 'Cultural Biographies of Things' (1986).

Thảo said in the talk at Cà Phê Thứ Bảy Trẻ that all of these ingredients and materials to make the garments are distilled from wild nature or produced from natural farming. The processes of exploitation and growing are well calculated to minimize impacts on the environment and consumption of unnecessary resources and energy. For example, redwood is obtained by picking up branches in second-growth forests rather than cutting down the whole trees. Yam roots are foraged in old-growth, sec-

ond-growth, protective and regenerative forests to stimulate canopy layers of the jungle. Yam is gnarly in shape, having dark brown rough peel and burnt ochre meat. Yam grows wild on large tree vines in northern Vietnam jungles. Only the local people know where and how to hunt yam based on their indigenous knowledge.

Indigo, hemp, cotton and ebony fruits are all homegrown by local people. Hemp is grown by Black H'mong in Lao Cai and Blue H'mong in



■ Indigo harvesting
(Photo: Kilomet109)

Hoa Binh. This plant is environment-friendly as it requires no extra watering, little weeding and no pesticides. Hemp seeds are planted in the mountain side with some organic compost and ready to be harvested after three to five months. Indigo dye is extracted from indigo plants. They are grown by Nùng An ethnic group, the first ethnic minority Tháo contacted and experimented with when she set up her own business. Nùng An people planted indigo among other rotating crops of vegetables, beans and corn from April to November, including two to three separate harvests. This rotating crop method helps to prevent pests and ensure a healthy soil. The weather conditions in Cao Bang where indigo is grown requires no extra watering during the crop.

Besides local agricultural techniques, natural elements are especially taken into consideration. Tháo argued that their planting activities rely on the natural conditions and they had no wish to scale up their farming. Hemp growing was limited to one harvest a year while a good year could enable two crops every year. Other materials such as cotton, ebony fruit and silk are grown and raised in different geographical locations by indigenous ethnic minorities as it had been practiced throughout various generations.

Each material production cycle could take up to six months, which made the garments categorized as 'slow fashion'. By the time of the in-

terview in July 2020, while the businesses had been struggling with the hit of Corona pandemic since March, Tháo and her artisan teams felt grateful to their unscalable process for limiting the impacts of the economic closure on their sale. At the heights of the pandemic around March, they just started planting seeds and making fibers until July and August they would harvest. This production process, according to Tháo, could not be scaled up or accelerated due to natural and cosmological time. For production integrity, humans could not impose their social and economic logics on natural processes; rather, it took time and patience for the natural materials to come into being.

The close and slow production cycle also enables Kilomet109 to take control of their garment quality. As Tháo spent time living and experimenting with local people and got involved in production stages, she gained a good grasp of the values of the fabric, understanding how much work and effort it took to create the finest textile and later applying all viable designing skills to enhance the beauty of the handmade textiles. She took her pride in the transparency of the origin and production processes of her products that not many fashion designers and labels can achieve. This ground up approach, to her, makes up sustainable fashion, the trend of fashion that enables both the designers and customers to be well informed of the fabric and dyes and limits impacts on the environment.

TWEAKING TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUES

After the harvest, fabrics are made through traditional technology, including handmade weaving, dyeing and calendaring techniques and beeswax batik drawing and support from age-old machinery. The processes of making fabrics and natural dyes are arduous and sophisticated and if done rigorously, yielding the top and finest products that no synthesized garments can compare. The traditional handmade techniques also create durable clothes and unique pieces that cannot be mass produced; as a result, no piece of clothing will look 100% the same as one another. This is associated with authenticity and uniqueness attached to singularity in fashion design and consumption, compared to manufactured commodities of plurality of global fashion brands.

Making organic fabrics and natural dyes are laborious processes requiring local knowledge and skills. Information about these stages are published on Kilomet109's website and social media to both inform customers of their ethical production and raise their awareness of the great amount of artisans' labor and skillfulness in production stages. Here is a description of the hemp making process on Kilomet109's Facebook page.

Making #hemp fabric is a long process. After hemp strips were peeled off from dry stalks and connected together, they are spun on a wooden spinning wheel. The H'mong artisans pedal the wheel by their feet. By doing that the hemp fibers are pulled out from the wet hemp balls and twisted onto bamboo spools. [17]

The yarn after that will be wrapped with cooking ashes overnight to bleach the yarn. H'mong artisans then boil the yarn several times until it turns white, adding beeswax to soften the fiber. This stage is repeated in the nearby river or stream, making the fiber softer and softer.

Here is the description of complex and arduous ebony fruit dyeing on Kilomet109's Facebook fanpage and website. Making ebony fruit dye and dyed fabric takes artisans in the Mekong Delta region up to two to three months. The ground ebony berries constitute a thick paste which is brought to the field nearby to be soaked in water for a few hours and then squeezed to release all the dye pigment. Ebony fruit dye is usually used to dye silk. The fabric is dyed, twisted and sun-dried over 45 times to produce the deep charcoal black color. To fix the color, it is then soaked in iron rich mud from the local river to prevent any fading or color rub off. After that, the dyed silk is beaten to soften the fabric, which gives it a leather-like texture. The pounding step used to be done by hand but

later by electronic machine due to the time-consuming and arduous process to finish a piece of ebony dyed cloth.

Despite the laborious work and high quality of products, Thảo observed that traditional craftsmanship were underestimated in Vietnam, as consumers would tend to value giant global brands over traditional handmade artworks. This perception contributed to cultural loss and devaluation of crafted textile products. She used

these traditional techniques of the Vietnamese ethnic minorities to devote to preservation of textile heritage, which, to her, is of utmost importance in shaping Vietnamese identity and culture in globalization. Additionally, keeping traditional techniques alive allows stabilizing local livelihoods, bridging regional economic inequalities and preserving cultural communities. If these techniques are often used, celebrated and can help members of the communities earn a living, they will survive and offer livelihoods



■ Thảo (right) and a Nùng An artisan rinsing fabrics in a cave in Cao Bang.
(Photo: Kilomet109)

for local people. This, according to Thảo, will reduce the possibility of rural-or-mountainous-to-urban migration and ease the impacts of economic inequalities between the 'underprivileged' and more affluent regions. Hence, using traditional textile making techniques also means standing for local artisans and keeping their craftsmanship alive.

However, Thảo did not copy and paste the available techniques to make fabrics for her garments. Rather, she applied them with twists and adjustments. For instance, during the time living with Nùng An women, she had experimented with different shades of indigo dye since 2012, creating a range of blue colors by tweaking certain elements in the dyeing process. Witnessing the time consuming process of using different pens for beeswax batik drawing of H'mong people, she asked artisans to use only one pen and draw her own designed patterns and motifs. This pushed the limits of rote skills and facilitated the openness for aesthetic vision of artisans.

In short, the fabrics making up Kilomet109 garments constitute the natural enablement, cultural artisanal knowledge and skills and visions for innovation of the fashion designer. The processes of making 100% natural textiles weave natural forces, humans and things together in their moving assemblage, embodying the old and new, the natural and culture, the genera-

tional knowledge and skills and contemporary imaginaries. Yet, to bring these actors together at their encounters for sustainable fashion clothes requires connective labor. That is building trust and standing by local communities.

THE INDIGO DYED FABRIC IN THE CORNER: FROM BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP TO FICTIVE SISTERHOOD

It was not easy to get the indigenous artisans to execute modifications to their age-old traditional techniques and design immediately. Only after an incident did Thảo realize that working directly with local communities took time and intensive labor. Thảo first approached Nùng An group in her early days as a fashion designer and started experimenting with indigo dye. Although Thảo thought her testing colors looked pretty, they did not receive positive feedback from Nùng An women; one matter of different personal opinions and tastes, she thought. She placed an order of 200 meters of indigo dyed fabric with the hard-earned money she got through several jobs she did back then to support her newly-born business. Sadly, though the colors looked good on a small piece of tester cloth, the large scale one became a disaster full of defects and unexpected shortcomings as at her absence during the production, some things went out of control among the Nùng An wom-

en group. She was upset and considered this as a waste of money. The fabric roll was left in the corner, yet it was not forgotten but became a lesson learned about mutual understanding and trustworthy relationships.

The faulty fabric drew her attention to the cultural differences between her and the artisans she worked with. In this sense, we can say that the indigo dyed fabric became a so-

cial actor initiating her journey of understanding of cultural histories and lifestyles of these ethnic minorities. It pointed out to her that her initial approach was too subjective and personal. She positioned herself as a fashion designer with long-term and contemporary vision about fashion and her artisans as people with excellent skills and techniques; if two of them cooperated, they would create something big and beautiful. Or so she thought. It turned out that



■ Thảo and Nùng An artisans.
(Photo: Kilomet109)

the cultural diversity, their social stereotypes towards Kinh people like her, misunderstanding and language barrier were the root causes of her failure. She decided to live with them - observed, cooked, ate and worked with them - to have an emic perspective.

The process took her a lot of time to build trust in the communities. Indeed, Thảo spent four and a half years living with Nùng An women and doing experimentations with natural fibers and dyes. She started to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each individual. She would know well who is best at spinning the yarn, who is best at weaving and who is best at dyeing. This approach to individuals instead of to the community as the whole helped her to relate and extend empathy to each member of her artisan communities.

More importantly, she realized the more she understood them, the more their relationship was transformed. It was no longer a business partnership but these women became her family. She did not only work with them to create fabrics and materials for the brand's garments but sometimes intervened to mediate internal conflicts and took risks with them in their venture. 'Working with communities means taking risks and finding solutions together. You always

need to be prepared for anything that could happen anytime.'*, said Thảo. Early in our interview, she referred to this as a real challenge that required tremendous patience and faith in her as a business manager. However, she knew that in order for them to understand her fashion design and be open to her modifications, she needed to spend time with them. There is no shortcut to close relationship building and production integrity.

At this point, we can say that the traditional textile heritage was an agent that brought the fashion designer and ethnic minority artisans together. However, what permeated their relationship that made it tighter, stronger and more humane were the time and presence they shared, the efforts to understand each other and the trust cumulatively built over time. Even now when their mutual understanding enabled her to manage fabric making processes from afar, Thảo still travelled back and forth to artisans' villages to join harvesting and textile production.

The transformed relationship was advanced further when Thảo identified her mission and social responsibilities were to equip artisans with skills to design good quality garments and turn their own communities as a potential market. One of the projects she was cherishing

* All direct quotes in this chapter, if not further explained, are taken from research interviews in June 2020

at the time of our interview was to provide a training program for the indigenous artisans whose handmade skills are impeccable but design skills need to be improved. If the project

was successful, Thảo said, they would be able to produce their own clothes that could be commodified in their own communities. If their group could become both producers and customers,



■ Kilomet109 garments take their pride in eco-conscious transparent production, aesthetic design and utilitarian quality.
(Photo: Kilomet109)

the local garments would be able to serve their own local market. In this way, to Thảo, indigenous artisans were empowered to set up their own cultural preservation projects with greater depth and more sustainability than her external support. This is Thảo's top priority on the agenda of her business. The social benefits and cultural preservation from inside were the 'blood vein' running throughout her cause that inspired her to keep on working on sustainable fashion.

WHEN TRADITIONAL TEXTILES MEET CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

Besides environment-friendly and social benefits, Kilomet109 eco-conscious clothing embodies utilitarian and aesthetic values through its design. Thảo combined details in the traditional clothes of various Vietnamese ethnic minority groups with her modern design to produce garments for urban consumers. This is how Kilomet109 added other layers to the traditional and textile heritage, bringing those cultural elements closer to urban customers. Final products of Kilomet109 received recognition from local and international markets and designer's communities not merely for cultural preservative attempts and ecological advantages but also for unique, highly aesthetic design. Thảo mobilised different designing techniques to highlight the values embedded in the textiles, for she knew well how much effort and hard work were in-

vested in the fabric making. Thảo, therefore, tried to minimize wastage in trimming. Saying no to mass production, from material making to design and finishing, she strived for a type of clothes that could be worn in different seasons and kinds of weather, which she referred to as 'season-less' fashion. [18]

Unlike seasonal collections of giant fashion brands, 'season-less' clothing focuses on utility and practicality of clothes in human lives rather solely on pleasure of catching up with the trends of consumers. These are the pieces of clothing that can be worn in different ways or combined with other pieces and in different seasons. Thảo emphasized the ethical aspects of season-less fashion owing to less pressure on productive and creative processes, distribution and marketing. More importantly, season-less fashion is exempted from the fanatics of producing seasonal collections, giving artisans, designers, researchers and labor workers time to enhance their product quality. This makes slow fashion more ethical, environment-friendly and attentive to cultural components.

Moreover, these contemporary designed garments reflect the dynamics in design of traditional clothes from indigenous perspectives. Thảo realized that not only clothes for Kinh people and urban consumers need to be well designed, local people also aspired to modify their own traditional clothes to meet the de-

mands of contemporary life. As life changed and society transformed, social activities required adaptations to the clothes people wear. Indigenous people also need to update their own clothes and design. 'It's superficial of us to assume they [people living in mountainous areas] and their cultures do not change. If the culture cannot update itself, it won't be able to survive', Thảo made an assertion as the findings of her research with her suppliers' communities about their perceptions and practice of traditional clothes making and consumption. In her experience, tradition is not fixed; rather, it is dynamic and subject to changes as social factors change. This poses the questions of tradition and modernity, the local and the global and authenticity and hybridity. How can we define what is local and traditional? Why do the local and traditional discourses evoke good quality and positivity? Does heritage need innovations? Is there anything pure and authentic or are they all hybrid as the cultures are connected? Who can participate in cultural changes and who does not have their say?

BEYOND THE CATWALK: WEAVING THE WORLD*

Kilomet109 underscored one of their goals is to set up a Vietnamese fashion brand for everyday wear instead of for a fashion showcase. Taking into consideration her limited resources and high values of her products, Thảo decided to focus on utility and quality of the garments.

It's such a waste of money to invest in fashion shows. I don't have enough resources to play this expensive game. Furthermore, my garments made of delicate fine textile and with traditional techniques are worthier than ones solely for entertainment shows. Excellent clothes are meant to be worn and celebrated in everyday life rather than for fleeting moments of showcasing.

The scope transgressing the fashion world was prominent not only in her garments' lives but also her own life as a fashion designer. The sustainable garments she produced helped connect her to other communities beyond designers' territories – groups of socio ecological activism, animal rights, biodiversity protection, researchers, universities and non-governmen-

* Inspired by Paul Stoller (2008) from the book *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey* (Paul Stoller).

tal organizations. For instance, Thảo is an active artist in VAWAA [19] community, an online platform helping to connect apprentices to master artists in a variety of artistic practices and professions around the world. Thảo would be the local guide and facilitator, leading the apprentices on study trips to the ethnic communities of artisans she works with and arrange practical study sessions on natural dyeing and textile making. These communities were endless sources of inspirations that enriched her life. She expressed her gratitude for the networking opportunities that her job offered.

In this sense, her job as a fashion designer did the connective labor, bringing her to other communities that she felt a sense of belonging to. They made her more humble, willing to learn and more critical about her work. At the same time, this sense of belonging and distributed personhood to different social groups challenges the singular perception about her profession in fashion design. Rather, it was hard for her to identify what her job was, as it went beyond fashion designing.

Nevertheless, Thảo asserted that being a fashion designer means more than sketching, being on the stage and appearing on fashion magazine covers. Instead, fashion designers need to manifest themselves to other social and political causes. Designing fashion means natural stewardship, cultural appreciation and preser-

vation, civic engagement and political activism through their artworks. Their role in weaving different social categories and lives together to create finest garments is viewed to advance a sense of community and oneness on national level amid globalization.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND IMAGINATIONS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Thảo talked about her initial intentions of setting up Kilomet 109 – to protect traditional craftsmanship and create a Vietnamese fashion brand. Her enterprise so far has achieved recognition and positive feedback from both national and international communities for a Vietnamese fashion label with its unique design, eco-conscious production and cultural preservative efforts. Kilomet109 garments managed to position themselves in the global market with its potential and competitiveness among other luxury, eco-fashion brands in the world.

Not many designers can do the deed. They can control their production from the design stage, but the origin of materials is oblivious to them. I am confident that I know my products well, thanks to our close, slow production cycle.

Indeed, the information about fabric and natural dye making is made available on Kilomet109's website and social media. On searching for Vietnamese ethnic minorities' traditional techniques of textile and natural dye making, I was absorbed in watching videos on their Facebook fanpage. The less-than-a-minute foot tapes feature the materials from which the sustainable garments are made and the local people, mostly women of ethnic minority groups. Although their faces were hardly shown, I was amazed by how skillful they are with fast and firm hand movements to transform the raw fibre or plants into the materials. These artisans' 'touches of magic' demonstrate the proficiency in traditional techniques that have accumulated for centuries and passed from one generation to another to make up diverse textile heritages of different ethnic groups in Vietnam.

To Thảo, posting these videos and journals on garment production and design on her brand's website and social media is not merely to ensure her production integrity but also to bring the wonder of textile heritage closer to the public, showing how diverse and colorful Vietnam is through this cultural richness of craftsmanship. Her sustainable garments, embodying natural textiles, traditional craftsmanship, community engagement and contemporary design, bring other aspects of Vietnam to foreigner consumers besides gloomy images of the Vietnam War portrayed by Western mass media. Kilomet109

pieces of clothing represent Vietnamese cultural diversity, creativity, ability of self-sufficiency and potential for innovations. They challenge the stereotypes of Vietnam as sweatshops of global brands associated with 'Made in Vietnam'. Rather, I understand that these garments represent pieces that are 'creatively crafted in Vietnam' in creative hubs across the country where handicraft villages have been energized by their people's cultural preservative projects.

Preserving craftsmanship was one motivation for Thảo to establish her enterprise. This national asset, to her, was put at risk with the opening up of the free market in post-Reform Vietnam during the 1990s. It all started with the personal observation of her time, when Vietnam integrated itself into the global flows of ideas, goods and people. The uprising of entrepreneurship and consumerism threatened the existence of traditional handicraft villages in Vietnam through mass production and new forms of longing for consumption. To Thảo, the persistent survival of a small number of these traditional craft villages is a blessing for the country, helping to define Vietnamese identity. Taking the vulnerability of Vietnamese traditional craftsmanship against global flows in post-Reform Vietnam, Thảo felt called on to mobilise communal effort and reach out to more remote ethnic minority groups of artisans and send a helping hand to preserve the fabric heritage which was on the verge of extinction. Thảo as-

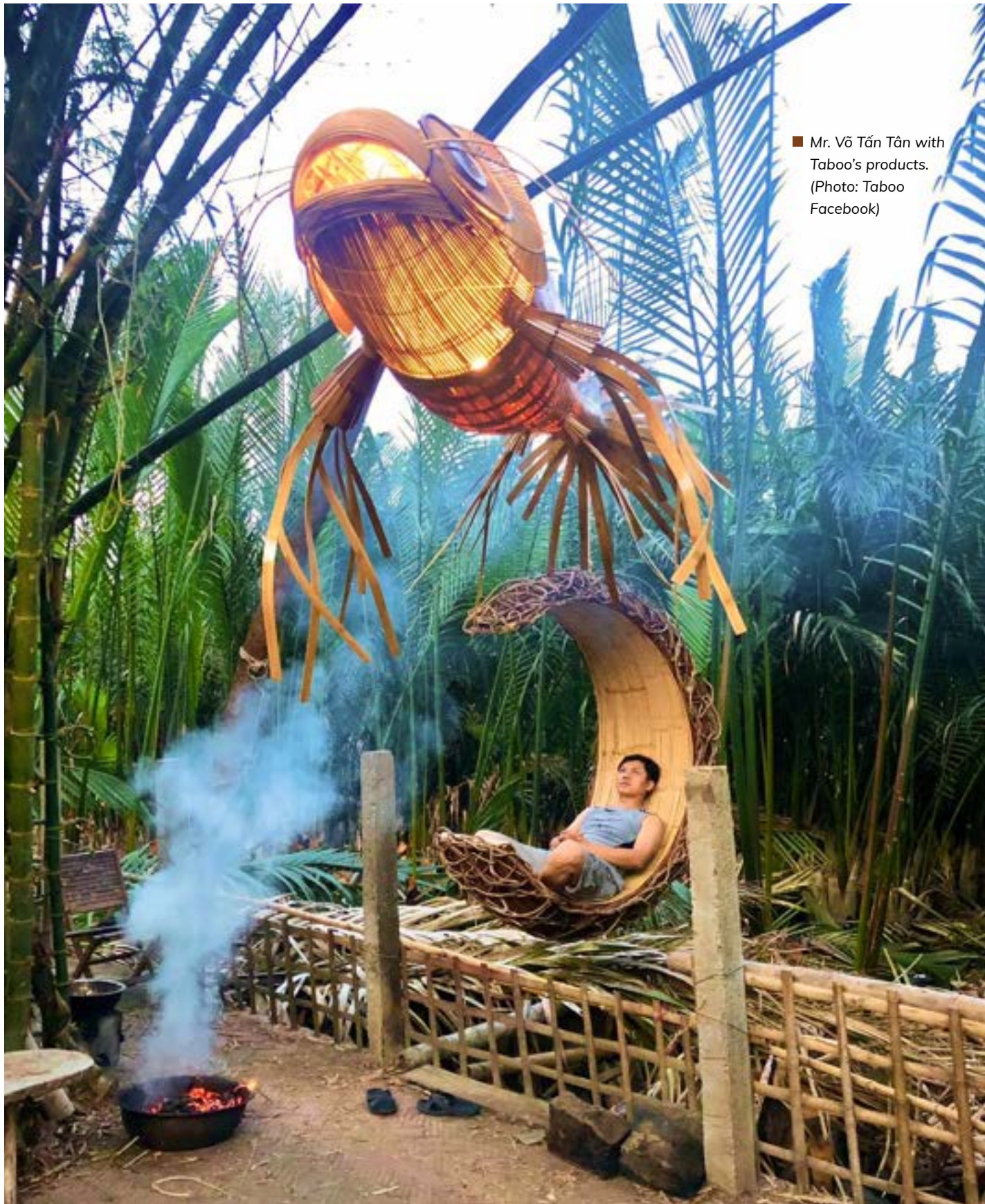
serted that this connective labour counted the work of the designer, geographically connecting ethnic minority communities across regions and Vietnam.

CONCLUDING REMARK: POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE GARMENTS

It can be seen that sustainable garments of Kilomet109 constitute cultural, social and political elements apart from aesthetic and designing qualities of fashion products. They are meant to challenge the hegemonic hierarchies between different labor of material and immaterial production. From Thảo's perspective, handmade works of ethnic minority artisans are supposed to be equally appreciated as the fine design of the fashion designer. The garments blur the boundaries between the ones who grow raw materials, make fabric, design and finish the final products. The permeability is created by the intimate cooperation of artisans, designers and consumers. Furthermore, the garments counter the regimes of global brands, advancing the value and production integrity of traditional fabric making and eco-fashion designing. What makes these pieces of sustainable garments superior to fast clothing are nature stewardship, cultural consideration and power relations. The traditional patterns of the garments also help to contest Western ethno-

centric representations of Vietnam in garment and textile making, foregrounding Vietnamese authenticity and creativity. They empower the Vietnamese to (re)shape their identity and global imagination of Vietnam against the gloomy and war-torn images constructed by Western media in the post-Vietnam-War era.

Kilomet109 garments are situated at the intersection of the local and global, the traditional and modern, the preservation and innovation. These dichotomies are constituted in the eco-garments, in their ethical production, creative design and eco-conscious consumption. The (hi)story of the garments only demonstrates a fraction of the exciting tensions and relations embedded in the webs of meanings. The garments weave the world, assembling humans, nature and things, proving that none of them is possible without the others' collaboration.



■ Mr. Võ Tấn Tân with Taboo's products. (Photo: Taboo Facebook)

THE CONTINUATION OF THE TRADITION: THE ENTANGLEMENT BETWEEN THE BAMBOO CRAFT AND THE LOCAL REGION

Whenever I think about Cam Thanh commune in Hoi An, the image that pops up in my mind is small villages nestled among the nipa palm mangrove. This mangrove lies on strips of dune formed by the sand from Cua Dai beach and the alluvial of the 3 rivers: Thu Bon, Truong Giang and De Vong. The space between these villages is a vast painting that combines the dark green of mangroves and the vast light of fields. Connecting villages together is a small road where travellers can be lost in the fragrance of rice plants. This road is as thin as a gentle brush stroke meandering along the boundary of the bright and dark colours of this vast painting of this prosperous countryside landscape.

Visiting the Taboo bamboo workshop in Thanh Tam Dong village, Cam Thanh on a summer day in 2020, I could not find the little road in my memory anymore. Instead, I drove on a new asphalt road that leads up to Cua Dai bridge. The bridge shortens the distance between Hoi An and Duy Nghia and opens up unprecedented development opportunities for the southern region of Hoi An. It took me a long time to look for Taboo workshop which should be easily located right at the edge of the village if I followed the small old road. Asking local people,

I found out that the road in my memory has been cut by the entrance to Cua Dai bridge and Taboo factory is now almost hidden at the foot of the bridge.

Contrary to the rough image of the big road outside, I found the old serenity behind the humble bamboo gate of Taboo workshop, where the palm roofs are still nestled in the shade of bamboo and orchards. Following the throbbing sound of chainsaws and chisels, I leisurely followed the small path leading to the end of the garden. Throughout the path, everywhere I saw impressive works of bamboo: swings, lounge chairs in strange shapes, bicycle frames lined up in rows, massive fish lamps that took a whole veranda... It's like the whole garden is an exhibition space about bamboo products. Wandering around watching until I suddenly realised that my vision was blocked by the foliage of the nipa palm mangrove, I was in the Taboo workshop space without noticing, because the workshop here is not limited under the roof but spilt over into the garden. This is where I met Mr Võ Tấn Tân - the owner of Taboo bamboo workshop who was concentrating on craftwork. With a pencil on his ear, Tân was attentively drilling on a small piece of bamboo. The marks of the



■ Cam Thanh map in 2012 (above) and 2021 (below).
(Ảnh: Google Earth)

pencil on that piece of bamboo revealed to me that Tân is making a lovely light cover.

‘Cua Dai Bridge and its path are like an incision in the flesh, an open wound of the Cam Thanh ecoregion’. Tân exclaimed when he heard me complain about having trouble finding the way, right after he sat down beside the tea-table. It is a familiar image of Tân to me as he does not hesitate to speak out about current issues, no matter how small his voice is. I could not help but smile when the expression ‘Quang Nam usually argues...’ flashed through my mind, perhaps this personality of Quang Nam people also played a significant part in the journey of creating a unique identity for Tân’s Taboo workshop, amidst the fast-changing streams from the surrounding world.

AMIDST THE FLOOD OF CHANGE

Urbanisation is pushing many Vietnamese villages to gradually lose their identity. Not only changing the rural landscape, but this stream is also taking many traditional craft villages to the verge of vanishing. Cam Thanh is not outside of that flow. Besides urbanisation, the massive development of tourism places additional burdens and challenges on preserving Cam Thanh’s identity.

Statistics show that the total number of visitors staying in Cam Thanh in 2019 reached

about 133,000. Total revenue from room rental is about VND 220 billion, while the revenue from ticket sales is VND 24 billion [20]. These are significant figures for this rural area of only 9.46 km² and a population of only 9,452 people [21]. Faced with new opportunities for income from services and tourism, many people, especially young generations, choose to break away from the traditional profession that has existed for generations in the family, because the traditional profession is often associated with hard labour with low income.

The nipa palm and bamboo craft - the most famous traditional craft in Cam Thanh is also influenced by that wave of escapism. Although local authorities have actively introduced policies to support traditional preservation, the achievements are still limited. In 2013, Cam Thanh launched ‘Central area of Cam Thanh commune’s bamboo and nipa palm village’ located on a 1.5-hectare site with an investment of about 4 billion VND. The project had many facilities: operator, reception house, supporting buildings and 12 land lots of 400m² for craftsmen to register to bring in bamboo and coconut materials to perform the process of production for visitors [22]. However, according to Tân, the location of this project is not convenient for transporting materials, the master plan design lacks drying space, while craftsmen do not like to work in cramped plots of land. After a period of inefficient operation, this project was transferred to a private company to build

a boutique resort. 'The project failed because the local government just sat at the desk, they didn't understand what the bamboo craftsmen actually needed'* - Tân concluded. Another failed example of the 'sitting at the desk' policy is the program to mobilise young people to learn bamboo craftwork. In fact, the youth in the village followed the encouragement to register for bamboo classes, when they received the support money from the government, they left for other jobs, no one committed to bamboo craftwork after that.

While the effort in making policies to support traditional bamboo craftwork has not been showing effectiveness, decisions at the city's planning level have also contributed to the wave of escapism from traditional occupations in Cam Thanh. In recent years, many new roads have been built to meet the needs of tourism development, including Cua Dai bridge - a controversial project that raised many public concerns because the path to the bridge crosses and divides the ecosystem of Cam Thanh mangrove into 2 discrete parts. Along the new route, passenger buses flocked to the small villages, Tân lamented:

The village is overloaded, many villagers quit their old occupations and switch to rowing basket boats to serve tourists, leading to unfair competition, reduced service costs, making people rowing basket boats like slaves for businesses.

Although the general income in the village has increased, the competition for taking tourists has caused damage to the neighbourhood relationship. It is not difficult to see the bitterness and frustration in Tân's face when he shared about the fact that people are rushing to do tourism in his village.

Cam Thanh is transforming with new economic opportunities, but the ecological landscape, traditional occupations, and relationships in the villages tend to decline. In that gloomy and chaotic picture, there are still bright spots like the Taboo bamboo workshop. I often hold the picture of Tân's workshop as a peaceful oasis of traditional craft in Cam Thanh, where he and his associates are still engrossed in their creation every day on familiar bamboo materials. Around this oasis, the currents of change are constantly flowing.

* All direct quotes in this chapter, if not further explained, are taken from research interviews in June 2020 or September 2021.

THE OCCUPATION IS GIVEN BIRTH BY THE REGION

Many times in the interview, I was touched when Tân emotionally shared about bamboo craft in Cam Thanh. The more I listen, the more I feel the close connection between the natural conditions here and the formation and development of the traditional bamboo craft, like nowhere else in Hoi An, or more broadly, the whole Quang Nam province is more suitable for bamboo craft than Cam Thanh.

The soil and vegetation conditions of Cam Thanh are the first factors affecting the formation of bamboo craft. Cam Thanh has an endemic nipa palm mangrove of more than 84 hectares [23]. With this gift from nature, many generations in Cam Thanh have been taking nipa palm leaves as the main material for their traditional houses. Whether for walls or roofs, this local material proves to be reliably durable. In fact, it is not difficult to find a nipa palm roof that has existed for decades in Cam Thanh. On the other hand, nipa palm roofs or panels need to come with a sturdy frame. In coastal areas with sandy soil like Cam Thanh, woody plants often grow slowly. Only bamboo with its strong vitality and high adaptability is suitable as a material for the frame structure.

Another specific natural factor promoting bamboo craft in Cam Thanh is the frequent

storms and hurricanes in Central Vietnam. In the southwestern provinces which are the homeland of the nipa palm tree, people also choose bamboo as a material for the house support system. However, due to the mild climate, bamboo houses in the Southwest region become fragile when being compared to the sturdy frame structure of bamboo houses in Cam Thanh. Tân is confident that the bamboo and nipa palm houses in his village can withstand strong storms up to levels 11-12. Adapting to the harsh nature, the bamboo craftsmen in Cam Thanh have found a way to strengthen the structure, they also created strong ties to protect the house against extreme weather conditions.

Besides the above factors, exploring the process of harvesting and processing bamboo materials also helps us to see more clearly the close relationship between the region and the traditional craft. Bamboo craft in Cam Thanh would not have developed that much if it is only based on materials in Cam Thanh. In a broader view, we need to mention the role of waterways. Since ancient times, it has been the vessel of Hoi An's transportation and trade. The heart of this vessel is Thu Bon River - the river connecting the distance of more than 50km from Cam Thanh to Nông Sơn mountainous area. Here, bamboo forests are abundant on both two sides of the river. After harvesting, bamboos are assembled into rafts and then being pulled downstream by small boats, to the estuary where the mangrove

of Cam Thanh is an ideal condition for bamboo soaking. Soaking is an important treatment to increase the hardness of bamboo and protect this material from termites.

Tân kept sharing more deeply about the bamboo soaking process and the advantages of Cam Thanh's natural terrain with his shining joy and pride. While almost everywhere else, people soak bamboo in stagnant water like ponds and swamps, Cam Thanh has a whole mangrove area with constantly circulating water. At high tide, Cam Thanh craftsmen gently push bamboo rafts from the river to the pits in the nipa palm mangrove. Every family here has a bamboo soaking pit. This is a customary form of property in the village, passed down from generation to generation. Tân also 'inherited' a pit from his family. The low tide is a favourable time to lower the bamboo raft into the pit and cover it with the mud. Fresh bamboo is kept completely submerged in the mud for about a year before being used. Unloading and transporting bamboo from the soaking pit to production areas also requires the help of tidal flow. Thanks to a little saltiness of the sea, thanks to the circulation of water, thanks to the thick layer of mud blocking the sunlight, bamboos treated at Cam Thanh are beautiful and sturdy.

Not all natural conditions in Cam Thanh are easy for people. The soil here is favourable for the nipa palm mangrove, but it is a difficult

factor for the growth of many other vegetations. The tide can be convenient for goods transportation, but it becomes a dangerous factor when floods and storms come. In order to survive and grow in this region, for hundreds of years, people have had to adapt and rely on nature. The unique bamboo craft in Cam Thanh is an expression of that long history of adaptation when the advantages and disadvantages of natural conditions are all involved in promoting the development of the bamboo craft. Therefore, I believe it is not exaggerating to say that this land has given birth to bamboo craft, along with skilled workers like Mr Muoi, who is known as the 'King of Quang Nam's bamboo', who is also the father, the master and the source of inspiration of Tân and Taboo workshop.

LEAVING FOR THE RETURN

Naturally, bamboo has become an integral part of Tân's life from childhood to adulthood. When he was a 10-year-old boy, he followed his father to build bamboo houses and coconut roofs. In the beginning, he just did simple things like preparing bamboo. With observation and practice, he gradually mastered more difficult techniques such as drilling, cutting bamboo to custom shapes. By the age of 14, Tân was able to build a house by himself, like a skilled craftsman. After studying electronics and working in Da Nang, Tân still keeps the habit of working

with bamboo in his spare time. Some of the products he made at this time were also asked to buy by customers because they found them beautiful and interesting. [24]

After graduating from university, Tân worked for 3 years on a production line at an assembly factory in Da Nang. Despite his advancement in work, Tân gradually felt that he was not really comfortable in this environment, then he quit his job and returned to Hoi An. In Tân's flashbacks, the feeling of being uncomfortable with the factory at that time only appeared vaguely and

could not be explained. What played a more decisive role in his choice of return was the lifestyle. Tân could not get familiar with the urban lifestyle, he missed the countryside where he grew up. Leaving Da Nang, Tân did not know that his experiences at the factory will later strongly affect his decisions for Taboo workshop.

Returning to Hoi An, Tân worked as a technical manager for a resort, so he became interested in tourism - the industry that was getting trendy in the development of Hoi An. During this period, Tân worked a lot with foreigners



■ Taboo's Bamboo bike.
(Photo: Taboo Facebook)

and connected with many enthusiastic intellectuals who helped enrich his knowledge and cultural vision. Tân was more deeply aware of the value of tradition, the value of craftsmanship and local identity. Working in tourism also helped him soon notice unstable changes in the village where he grew up:

Because of tourism, the occupation structure in the village has begun to shift, new occupations have appeared. Traditional jobs are very intense in labour with moderate income, many bamboo craftsmen wanted to change their work... to be honest, I knew it was the time to go back.



■ Working with bamboo by hands is the only way to understand the natural features of bamboo (Photo: Taboo Facebook)

CONTINUITY OF TRADITIONAL BAMBOO CRAFT

The existing model of the traditional bamboo craft in Cam Thanh focuses mainly on construction, making furniture or some popular handicraft products such as baskets, lantern frames. Tân chose a different direction right at the beginning. Tân aimed to be unique and creative with bamboo bicycle products - a product that soon brought fame to Taboo workshop. After some difficulties with the bike structure in the initial period, Tân and his father successfully researched and manufactured a synthetic glue of natural ingredients, combined with hemp fibre to reinforce the bearing joints on the bike frame. As a result, the bicycle products of the Taboo workshop have estimated durability up to 20 years, with a warranty time up to 10 years [26], attracting attention beyond the territory of Vietnam to approach the international market.

After the first 3 years of focusing on manufacturing bamboo bicycles and gaining considerable success, many businesses approached Tân to ask him to replicate the model. They invited Tân to manage the mass production of bamboo bicycles. Understanding bamboo materials, and also understanding how to operate the industrial style through his years of working in Da Nang, Tân turned down all these great opportunities. 'Bamboo in industrial production will lose its quality' - Tân explained, once again I

Trying to preserve the traditional bamboo craft, Tân studied many research materials on bamboo. Most of the documents he has read are from Western authors, his concern is that 'bamboo is Vietnam's unique plant' but in Vietnam, there are very few studies on this plant, while 'in Western countries, they don't have much bamboo but they have spent a lot of time researching and have very good research papers'. Tân noticed there was a gap in awareness about bamboo in Vietnam. Besides, learning more about bamboo also made him realise the great potential of this eco-friendly material - a natural material that can replace industrial products such as plastic, metal. [25]

For such reasons, 2012 marked the birth of Taboo workshop with the goal of preserving the traditional bamboo craft, and at the same time influencing and changing public awareness about bamboo and the environment through their handmade products. Just like many other young people in the village, Tân has left the bamboo industry to look for new opportunities in the city. In the journey of adulthood, the more he accumulated living capital, knowledge and culture, the more passionately Tân found out about his father's bamboo craftwork. Thanks to reaching outside, Tân saw clearly the way to return and got the understanding that he had to adapt the bamboo craft to preserve this traditional occupation in the time of change.

saw his eyes light up when he described bamboo's natural flexibility:

You have to try to work with bamboo by hand. When you follow the longitudinal direction of the yarn, you realise that you have to consider the way you control the tip of the knife, when it reaches the shell or the inner body. This consideration helps you understand the amazing flexibility of bamboo. It's a magical material... bamboo will lose its characteristics when being industrialised, it will become rigid, then it's no different from wood and loses its intrinsic values, bamboo is born to be made by hand...

Instead of expanding the model on an industrial scale, Tân chose to diversify bamboo products. Aiming at environmental values, Tân wants to 'make everything in his life out of bamboo', first for himself, and then to provide alternative products to the market. Indeed, it is necessary to list briefly the products of Taboo workshop to imagine the seriousness and efforts of Tân in implementing this intention. Only on the small table at the showroom cottages, I found all kinds of bamboo household items: spoons, straws, glasses, pipes, pens, decorative lights... Some products that seem to belong only to the technology world can also be found here, such as cases for smartphones, mobile phone holders. There are also a lot of toys for children such as animals, trains, bulldozers, helicopters,

bamboo... All of these are unique, requiring creativity and processing time.

Besides selling products, Taboo workshop is also famous for another unique activity - a workshop that trains tourists about bamboo crafts. Visitors can bring any idea about the souvenir they want to have. Tân and his colleagues will guide step-by-step so that visitors can make the item by themselves. In Taboo Workshop, visitors learn about the story of bamboo craft in Cam Thanh, while experiencing the process of making product for themselves, and in the end, they can bring home the souvenir after only 2-3 hours of working under the guidance of Tân and the workers at Taboo workshop. As a result, the souvenirs are no longer strange objects bought randomly on the road, but become close and attached to the discovery and creative journey of visitors. The satisfaction with experience in this unique workshop is being reflected in the 5-star reviews and many positive comments on the Tripadvisor system - a giant in the modern tourism industry.

In the orientation of the Taboo workshop, we see how traditional craftsmanship is preserved and developed, while products and activities are adapted to match the current time. Thanks to this intention and the creativity of Tân and his associates, the role of Taboo has reached beyond the normal boundary of a family workshop and become an important point in the value chain that makes up the brand of Hoi An tourism.

A SINGLE TREE CANNOT MAKE THE FOREST

Tân affirmed: 'Success means doing the thing that you like while earning a good income'. With this statement, the founder of Taboo workshop can be satisfied with what he has done after nearly 10 years of operation. What surprised me was that Tân does not see many difficulties in his journey. He explained the reason: 'Taboo factory started with its own capital: craft skill, little monetary investment, slow work...' Although not mentioned by Tân, I believe there is still another important factor that is beyond these analyses, which is his love for bamboo crafting. This factor has made solving difficulties become a joy.

Not only satisfying Tân's passion for the profession, the success of Taboo workshop has created a positive influence on the surrounding community. The success of Tân has inspired and motivated some young people to return to the village and build their career in bamboo craftwork. Taboo workshop is also open to recruiting, training and stabilising jobs for many young people. The most important principle to choose a partner for Taboo workshop is the love for bamboo craft, Tân shared:

I'm not rich, but I'm always willing to support those who are passionate about bamboo, but for those who only consider bamboo as a temporary job, I could not

recruit them, because it takes a lot of time to train a worker in bamboo craft and it's a waste to train someone who is not committed to this field...

2020 is the first crisis year of Hoi An before the Covid-19 pandemic. Without tourists, many local businesses faced difficulties. Many people lost their jobs. Taboo workshop is still stable thanks to orders from distant provinces. In the middle of 2021, the whole country was isolated during the 4th wave of the Covid-19 epidemic, many projects collapsed, orders from distant provinces were cancelled, Taboo workshop still maintained stable work for its craftsmen. 'If it's not okay outside, I'll go inside', Tân considers this period as an opportunity for Taboo workshop to try deeper research to create more unique products. New products created in this inner time will be brought to the market after the pandemic is over. Scrolling the cursor through Taboo's Facebook page these days, I felt amazed by Tân's new experiments: small toys with surprising self-balancing abilities, a fish lamp which is in immense scale and its meticulousness is far beyond all the previous products, or even a small tea hut floating on a bamboo grove in Tân's family garden.

Preserving traditional craft, working with eco-friendly materials, the insider's sense of success, positive impacts on the community, keeping stability with disturbance from external events... all can be considered as elements

of a sustainability model. However, Tân still thinks his influences are too small, he feels sad with the negative impacts of urbanisation, environmental pollution due to tourism overload and the explosive development of Cam Thanh:

The situation is too late for Hoi An, the ecological villages have been destroyed. People's awareness can't keep up with the growth of tourism, the government's awareness also can't keep up... local people have not received many benefits from tourism while the ecosystem has been destroyed.

The water flow for transportation in the past is also interrupted:

Since the construction of the hydroelectric dam on the upstream, the river is drier than before, and now people rarely transport bamboo to Cam Thanh by raft like the traditional way, the folk experience of observing the rhythm of the water flow is now no longer usable...

These concerns obsessed me for a long time, along with questions that are not easy to answer: Can a few small workshops like Taboo keep the spirit of a traditional craft village? The bamboo craft is given birth by the region, but if the ecological area that nurtures the bamboo craft is lost, will the traditional craft really sustain?

FINDING SUSTAINABILITY FOR TRADITIONAL CRAFT

Temporarily putting aside these concerns to look back, it can be seen that the success so far of Taboo workshop bears the bold imprint of Tân's personality. He was born with a great advantage as he was mentored by a father who is both enthusiastic and skilful at bamboo crafting. Later, diverse experiences in different environments such as factories, tourism, together with the capacity in English languages expanded Tân's worldview, helped him gradually realise that 'working with bamboo is also working with culture'. Obviously, Taboo workshop today is the result of an accumulation of living experience and knowledge.

It is a headache for the local government to find a solution to preserve the traditional craft village in Cam Thanh. Their approach has a tendency towards large-scale and concentrative projects with propaganda campaigns. Tân offers a different way of thinking. He believes that preserving the craft village needs to be based on the establishments and workshops that are operating. This approach is decentralised, requiring close interactions between the policymakers and the craftsmen.

'What policymakers need to do is just simply support local craftsmen to work in a more convenient way, do not force them

to do anything. For example, if the water flow is blocked, the government can clear the blockage to help the transportation of materials. If craftsmen are not good at sales, the government can help them to build distribution channels...'

I agree and believe in Tân. The most natural way to preserve traditional bamboo craft should put workshop spaces like Taboo in the centre because it is where the bamboo craft is being

alive with both challenges and opportunities in the current time. Besides the grassroots foundation, the future of preserving bamboo craft in Cam Thanh is also relied on the vision and policy of the local government, because protecting the beauty of the landscape, the healthy state of the environment is also important in preserving the traditional bamboo craft, as the story of the traditional occupation and the story of the region are interconnected.



■ The products demonstrate the high-level craftsmanship of Taboo .
(Photo: Taboo Facebook)

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Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Asia. Hanoi office

Address: House number 8c, alley 76, To Ngoc Van,
Tay Ho, Hanoi

Phone: +84-24-37185836

Fax: +84-24-37185834

Email: hanoi@rosalux.org